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Vol. LXI.

Plunger Pete, the Race-Track Detective.



"BE CAUTIOUS!" WARNED DUKE. "DETECTIVE THOUGH YOU ARE, THE DESPERATE WRETCH INSIDE WILL SHOOT YOU IF HE CAN!"

Plunger Pete, THE RACE-TRACK DETECTIVE; OR, Bouncing the Bowery Wolves.

BY WM. H. MANNING,

AUTHOR OF "STEVE STARR, THE DOCK DETECTIVE," "OLD DOUBLEDARK," "YANK YELLOWBIRD," "DARK JOHN," ETC.

CHAPTER I.

DRIVEN TO DESPERATION.

NIGHT was over the City of New York, and the hour was the most somber and quiet that comes to the great city. In its streets the current of its life never ceases to flow, but as the ensuing day draws near there is a relaxation, and pedestrians are not numerous.

It was at this time that a man stood on one of the streets where poverty rests always, and crime is no stranger. Near where he was he saw nobody else. The tramp of a patrolman had died away, and other travelers there were none just then.

He stood at the entrance to an alley and looked up and down the street with eager eyes.

The question did not refer to any one he had met before, it did not refer to any certain person he expected. The clearest idea he had of the identity of the man looked for was that he should be a *victim*!

He was in ambush to find his prey.

A more appropriate place for such a deed it would have been hard to find. No electric lamp shed its light near at hand, and the gas seemed in the last stages of a decline. It barely broke the darkness, and left the shadows deep, dark, gloomy and gruesome.

These surroundings had been sought intentionally by the night-prowler. He had that to do which would not bear the light of day, or of anything else, and the place fitted the deed.

With the alley back of him and a wooden stoop at either side he was well concealed; but, what did that matter, as long as no one was near? He grew nervous, impatient.

"Will he never come?" was the repeated inquiry. "I want to do this work and have it over with. Then I shall know whether I am to reap success, or spend the balance of the night in a prison cell. I am penniless, and I can never reach the goal of my hopes until I secure money. Money! I must and will have it—money and then Catholine and a cool million!"

He stopped short, and looked eagerly down the street.

"Ha! did I hear a footstep?"

A pause ensued, and then he straightened up from his half-bent attitude.

"No, not yet. Delay; more of delay! But, my life! I will brook little more of this waiting. I will leave this darksome neighborhood and go even to their boasted Broadway, and *there* do the work!"

Another pause, and then he added:

"Has Luke Harkness come to this? There was a time when I was no beggar, and no footpad, but the world has used me ill. Did my ability to do all things well end with the beginning of the life I led when I was a slave of the Algerine Arabs, and daily exposed to the blows of their whips? My curse on them!—I wish I had the power to pay the debt further than I did. Ha! a footstep, sure!"

He stopped short and stood with every sense on the alert. Dimly he saw a man at the junction of the streets, but the passer turned and went down the cross-way. He had escaped the snare.

"A curse on the luck!" muttered Luke Harkness. "Has fate gone back on me wholly? But, let me be patient! I can endure ill-luck now, for does not each step bring me nearer to Catholine? Oh! what joy it will be when I win her—and the Lester money! Then I shall be rich—rich!"

His face, at the thought, had lighted up with a smile—not one of pleasant aspect, but rather of greed, avarice, self-triumph.

Tramp! tramp!

At the sound Luke Harkness, as he called

himself, started again. He looked, and the blood leaped anew in his veins.

"He comes!" he breathed in undertones of fierce emphasis and look.

Down the street walked a man with long, quick steps. Obliged by the nature of his calling to make late hours, his face was now set toward the Elevated Railroad. From there he expected to go home, as usual. He did not dream of the experience which awaited him at the noisome alley.

The night prowler crouched behind the stoop and prepared for the swoop. New work was this for him, but he was apparently eager for it.

Nearer, nearer came the victim. He reached the line of the stoop.

Like a tiger Luke Harkness leaped from his ambush. Sure as death was his aim, and his hands closed around the neck of the pedestrian. Shutting off all outcry with singular skill for a novice, he neatly tripped his man and fell upon him.

Never releasing his hold, he buried his fingers in the stranger's neck and held on with grim purpose. How grim the situation was he did not stop to think; he was there simply as a robber, yet he was exercising a power which would soon make him a murderer, if he was not checked.

Desperately the victim struggled in the hands of the garroter, but all in vain. His breath was shut off, and death was hovering near.

Not a cry could he utter.

"Your money or your life!" grated the assailant.

He seemed likely to get both, but, even in the moment of his triumph, he was suddenly and violently pulled off his prey, and flung forcibly to the sidewalk. He lay sprawling there for a moment, but by the dim light he saw two men standing over him.

"Punch the head off him!" cried one, in a cheerful voice. "Give him a sockdolager!"

"We don't need to do that. He is helpless," was the reply.

"So is his victim. Hallo! I reckon not!"

The person who had been so nearly strangled suddenly leaped to his feet, and then dashed down the street like a race-horse.

"I say, Pete, that's cool!" added the last speaker, in disgust. "We save the fellow's life, and then he gallops off like a Sheep-head thoroughbred. Shall I run him down?"

"No, no, Silky, don't think of it. What do we care what becomes of him, now we have saved him?"

"You may be right, Pete. Ah! his nibs gets up also!"

The last words referred to the garroter, who had struggled to his feet.

"Hands up!" exclaimed Silky. "No monkey biz here, old man."

"If you have a revolver, keep it inside your coat," added Pete. "If you try to fight us, you will fare worse than before. We'll plug you!"

The garroter shut his teeth on his lip and trembled less from fear than from rage.

"My curse on you!" he cried; "you have robbed me of the money I needed!"

"I reckon we have, Mister Thug," coolly agreed the more talkative rescuer. "The streets of New York were not made to do such work in, so just put your arm in mine, and we will waltz over to the nearest police-station."

"Would you have me arrested?" bitterly demanded the garroter.

"Well, I should say we *would*!"

"Oh! this is maddening!" cried Luke, brokenly. "Oh! give me the pity one human being owes another. You don't understand; you don't know that I am starving. Penniless and among strangers, I am almost mad. Without money all is lost; with it the fairest future that man could have is open to me. Do you think me a mere vile robber? I swear I am not, but I had to have money *now!* I sought it in the only way open to me, a perfect-stranger in this great city."

It was a wild, impetuous appeal, and the manner of the garroter was full of unconscious power. He who was called Silky had both the appearance and the years of a youth, but his companion was older and wiser. The latter was moved by the appeal, and he watched the garroter keenly.

Was this passionate defense founded on truth?

CHAPTER II.

THE PASSION OF A LIFE.

THE man called Pete did not let his curiosity end with thought, but quietly asked:

"Are you out of work?"

"Yes," replied the garroter,—"out of everything!"

"And you took this desperate step to get cash?"

"Yes."

"He says it well," interrupted Silky, "but I wouldn't gamble much on his veracity, by mighty!"

"May misfortune seize you as it has me!" cried Luke, fiercely, angered by the questioning remark. "When you have seen the true misery of life; when you have felt hunger, thirst, the heat of burning sun and the pain of blows; when all your fair prospects fade and life becomes a burden, you will know what my situation is. I pray you may know it, and by experience. You taunt me now, but your turn may come. I hope it will; I hope your flesh will dry on your bones for lack of food, and you be friendless and alone, as I am!"

The savage, passionate threat rather dazed youthful Silky, and he was not ready with a reply. Before more could be said footsteps sounded, and a patrolman appeared on the scene.

"What's all this?" he inquired, suspiciously.

The late garroter shrunk back, and terror seized upon him. It was not cowardly fear, in the usual sense of the word, but the dread lest his future career should be thwarted by discovery of his recent act, and his existence be that of prison life. The thought filled him with horror. His color fled, and his knees were so weak he could hardly stand.

A terrible figure was the blue-coated officer to him.

"Nothing!" he gasped.

"Nothing?" echoed the patrolman, sharply. "Why are you skulking around here in the dark?"

"Donby, is that you?" asked Silky's companion.

"Ha! Pete, is it you?" replied the officer, quickly.

"Yes."

"Then I reckon this is all right. Do you answer for your two companions' honesty?"

For a moment Pete hesitated. The "companion" on his right side was a baffled garroter. He ought to be in prison, and Pete knew it, but the man's wild plea, and his evident distress of mind appealed strongly to the policeman's acquaintance. If his claim was true this night might be the turning point in his career; the time when he would be saved for better things, or go straight to ruin.

"They are all right," Pete replied.

Luke drew a quick breath. Saved! His blood had been like ice; now it leaped in his veins like molten lava, hot and swift of motion.

"All right," decided the blue-coat. "By the way, Pete, how about the fifth race at Gravesend, to-morrow? What horse will win?"

"I fancy Banquet. He has dangerous rivals, but the sterling old horse is in good shape, and ought to be able to give the youngsters a try."

Pete responded and the officer walked down the street, swinging his night-stick, his burly form growing less and less terrible to Luke as it receded in the dim and murky light of the narrow way.

The garroter turned abruptly to Pete.

"Saved! saved!" he cried. "Bless you for what you have done; bless you. May all good be yours!"

"I hope you will deserve what I have done for you. Strangling is not a social virtue in New York, and I trust you will understand it and reform. If I thought you would not, it would be a poor reward for my help to you."

"Oh, trust me. No reform is necessary. I'll never be so rash and mad again," but there was little heart or sincerity in the promise. In truth, he was thinking even then that he would soon have to try his footpad trick again.

"Look here," added Pete, "I have but little money with me, but I shall shell out

what I have. It is one of my weaknesses that I give without reason or prudence, sometimes. I hope it will not be misapplied charity now."

He thrust a couple bank-notes into the strangler's hand, and Luke clutched them fiercely.

"Bless you, bless you!" he exclaimed, rapturously.

"Will that keep you from crime?"

"Yes, yes!"

"See that it does, or you will bring up at Sing Sing."

"I am saved, saved! There will be no further need of crime; the future now is clear! I shall go on my way, sure of success!"

The speaker grasped Pete's hand and went on rapidly:

"Sir, I am no ordinary robber, but a man in ill-luck. This money will help me to get on my feet. I am heir to a vast fortune, and now it will soon be mine. I have only to find certain persons to secure my own, and this I can do now. This was my first crime, and it will my last. Bless you, sir; bless you!"

There was no doubt of his thanks being sincere, but even as he spoke he siddled away, preparatory to taking his departure.

The man, Silky, was plainly displeased with the situation, but he did not interfere, and, as Pete had no more to say, the garrotter was allowed to go his way, and he soon vanished from sight.

"A picture of New York life!" murmured Pete.

"Yes."

"Yes, the picture of a rascal!" retorted Silky, "or I miss my guess."

"Very likely you are right, but I could not see the poor devil in trouble. I gave him the chance to lead a decent existence. Probably he will abuse the opportunity. But my conscience is clear. He has his chance."

"Well, though he's as full of evil as an egg is of meat you've shown the goodness of your heart, all the same. By the way," added the youth, in a lighter tone, "why didn't you tell him you were Plunger Pete, and give him a tip on the races?"

"I will, when I see him again."

"Would you know him?"

"Now you mention it, no; it is so confounded dark here I didn't get to see enough to know how he looks."

"Nor did I, that's a fact. But now he is gone, and we shall never know who he was, even if we meet him to-morrow."

At that moment Luke Harkness, hurrying along other dark streets, was exultantly thinking:

"Saved! saved! Nobody can now bring me to justice! Neither the man I tried to rob nor those who saved him could see my face in that dim light, and I—I should not know them again if I were to meet them face to face—which won't trouble my conscience a bit!" and he laughed at the thought.

The thought so simultaneously expressed by the two parties was well founded, as events were to prove. The three were to meet again, but as strangers. Not only had their faces been unidentified in the darkness, but Luke had been so excited that his voice was unnaturally pitched, while in his excitement he had taken no note of the voices of Pete and Silky.

So Luke waxed exultant.

"This must be the beginning of good luck, and now I will press the case that too long has been neglected. I must renew my search for Catholine, or those who can tell me of her. Sweet Catholine—ah, it will be bliss to see her—and touch the Lorrester money!" and again that smile of greed and self-triumph.

"Three years have I been absent, and could send no word to her—three years on the deserts of Africa, the slave of Hamor Ali and his Arabs, and daily exposed to their blows and fiendish cruelty. But I am home again, thank God—home—to win her and the fortune that is to be ours when we are one, for that was the will's command."

"How will she receive me? She was not gracious to me of old, but she was then a girl of eighteen years. Now she is older, and must be wiser; she will see where her interests lie, and do the bidding of our excellent ancestor."

"Catholine, my peerless beauty! To see you will be a reward for all I suffered on the

deserts. My love for you has never grown cold, and I will hasten to you, as soon as possible, for surely you will now be glad to see me."

"I must find you. I'll get a horse and ride through the territory to the East of the Hudson, for in that section live those who can tell me where Catholine is, when I can find them. That is only a matter of a few days. If not, and this gift of my generous friend—hal! ha! fails, I will seek more as I sought it to-night, for I cannot pause to earn it. I cannot wait even a day, to do that."

CHAPTER III.

LUKE CREATES CONSTERNATION.

THREE days later Luke Harkness was seated in a private room of a hotel in a small town on the east side of the Hudson River. He was by a table, and writing with haste.

He was a man of fairly good form and muscular strength, but this did not make him an agreeable-looking person. His face was not good, and, though he had seen only thirty years of life, there was now a worn, haggard aspect to the face which, united with signs of a rebellious, passionate nature, made him one not likely to attract favorable attention.

This is what he wrote as he sat there:

"CATHOLINE:—It will be a supreme surprise to you when you learn that, after being unheard of for three years, I am still living. I beg that you will not blame me for the long silence, for I shall be able to explain a way my seeming neglect.

"This story I hope to tell you in person, but a certain possibility causes me to write these lines and tell you what has occurred to me this day. You must, at all hazards, know without delay that it was I you met.

"I was traveling near here when I saw a score of people riding rapidly across the fields near the road. The horse of one of the ladies ran away, leaped the fence, stumbled and fell with its rider. She was stunned, and I went to her aid.

"Catholine, I had not known you were within a hundred miles, so judge of my great surprise when I recognized you in the senseless lady!"

"Rapturous joy seized upon me, and—perhaps I was hasty—I gave way to emotion, to unspeakable happiness. You were in my arms; I held you tight and pressed kiss after kiss upon your cheeks and lips. I know you will forgive me, for we were such dear friends, and co-heirs to the Lorrester money, you know. But, some one else did not know that fact, or what then happened never would have occurred.

"A rough hand grasped me and flung me to the earth. I rose, only to be felled by a blow from a man I did not see, and was laid senseless on the rocky ground. I realize now that the assailant supposed I was a stranger, and believed I was taking advantage of your helplessness by kissing you. He should have waited.

"But he shall pay dearly for his blows!

"When I recovered I rode on. From a citizen I learned that the riders I had seen were the Eagle Cross-Country Club members; that they were guests of a New York gentleman named Darius Ashby, at his summer house, which was pointed out to me.

"Of course I realized that you must be one of the guests, and I decided to see you as soon as possible. I was dust-covered, so I came, first of all, to this hotel. Now, I am to go to the house of this Mr. Ashby to see you. Total stranger that he is to me I have nothing to do with him certainly, but you—oh! Catholine, how my heart and love go out to you!"

"The possibility that you were injured in the adventure of this day leads me to write this, so I can leave it if you are unable to see me, but I trust we shall meet this very hour."

Luke Harkness signed his name and was done. He rose, put on his hat and left the room.

"Now for the bliss of my life," he muttered, "unless she repulses me! But she will not; the Lorrester fortune is the proof. I go to get a verdict at the hands of this divine woman. I'm a bit nervous with so much at stake. Love and fortune alike wait

for the verdict of the next few hours. On to learn the result—and my fate!"

He had reached the public room of the hotel, and would have passed through without delay had not his steps been arrested by words of interest to him.

"Yes, sir," declared a deep voice, "I am going to the Ashby house this night for satisfaction."

Luke Harkness's eyes strayed to the man who thus proclaimed his intentions. The latter was a person of middle age, slightly above the middle height and possessed of very broad shoulders. His garments were coarse, and so was his face. Clearly, he was of commonplace rank in life, and his intelligence was not of the intellectual sort.

"There is a meeting of the club there to-night," suggested the landlord.

"What of it?" sharply inquired the coarse-faced man.

"Rather a bad time to interrupt Ashby if you want to induce him to make a settlement."

"I don't. Induce him? Not much; I shall demand a settlement, and I shall have it. See?"

"It's my opinion you will find Darius Ashby a hard man to drive into anything."

"Leave that to me. I am going to have my rights. Gentlemen, I sent a perfect horse to him. I have been twenty-five years a horse-dealer, and I know a horse when I see one. Ask anybody what the reputation of Hiram Inkrod is—that's me. Well, Ashby called on me for a first-class saddle-horse. I had one, and the price was six hundred dollars; that was the price, and he was worth every cent of it. Ashby wanted him on trial. I would not let every man have such an animal, but I learned that Ashby was president of this swell Cross-Country Club, and a rich chap in addition, so I gave in. More fool I!"

Hiram Inkrod, horse-dealer, brought a ponderous fist down on the table with force which made the furniture dance, and then went on:

"In a few days the horse came back to me a wreck. Ashby says it came to him that way. I say he's a liar, and he will pay that six hundred or I'll whip the skin off his bones!"

Plainly enough Mr. Inkrod was a man of violent temper, but he had so much muscle that nobody was inclined to make light of his sanguinary threat.

"Why don't you go to law?" inquired a mild-looking listener.

"I will, after thrashing him first."

"Suppose you fail?"

"Fail?"

"Yes."

"Jupiter! I shall not fail!"

"There isn't a man in this section who has more of good, hard muscle and grit than this same Darius Ashby. I'll tell you that."

"So much the better!" declared Inkrod, grimly. "I had rather whip a person who can make a good fight of it than a weakling. Anyhow, Ashby has insulted me in his letters, and I'll punish him within an inch of his life!"

Again the horse-dealer pounded the table, and most of those present thought they had just as soon be themselves, then, as Darius Ashby.

Luke Harkness, however, suddenly turned impatiently away.

"Why do I let a mere horse-jockey keep me?" he growled, irritably. "He has a grudge against the rich New Yorker, Darius Ashby. What of it? My grudge is against the man who struck me this day, and he shall pay dearly for it!"

He touched the bruise on his head where he had been cut by the rocks as he fell. Yet, the wound was not equal to that of pride. He had endured blows from Hamor Ali, the Arab, but he would bear no more tamely.

It was but a short walk to the Ashby house. It proved to be a veritable country mansion, well embowered among trees and shrubbery, and a fine-looking place. Luke entered the spacious grounds.

"What if Catholine is not here?" he wondered. "My theory makes her one of the guests, but she may not be. I trust she is here, and not severely injured by the fall of the afternoon. Oh! it will be good to meet her again!"

Exulting in the possibility he went on.

Guests were on the wide piazza, and inside the house, and all making merry, it seemed.

"Happy Ashby!" murmured Harkness. "Money is his in abundance, and he can leave his city home, come here for awhile and have friends all around him—or so the old farmer told me to-day."

Reaching the piazza Luke accosted one of the guests politely.

"Excuse me," he said, "but is Miss Lorrester here?"

"I never heard of such a person," was the reply, flippantly given.

Harkness was staggered, but his gaze suddenly wandered to the scene visible inside. Then his face flushed. He saw a charming woman—the most beautiful of all there—the same he had held briefly in his arms that afternoon—the same for whom he had inquired.

He waited for no more. Stirred by the sight out of his usual calmness he took a few long steps and crossed the line of the piazza. With hurried steps, eager face and gleaming eyes he entered the brilliantly-lighted room. In that room elegantly-dressed men and women were talking gayly, and their number was a full score besides those outside, but he heeded not the fact.

Straight to the side of the lady he went.

"Catholine!" he exclaimed.

She looked up with a start. She had not seen him before; she had not heard the talk on the piazza; she had no warning of his approach.

Now she was startled. To her the bronze-faced man was a stranger as far as her eyes told her then, and it was a rude shock. She found no words in which to answer.

"Catholine, don't you know me?" he added, rapidly. "I am come home; I am with you again; the dead is alive, and I meet you again. Thank Heaven it is so—thank Heaven!"

He stretched out his hands; he seemed to expect her to rush to his embrace; it was the greeting of a lover.

The lady rose quickly and retreated. Frightened, she fell back among her friends, seeking protection, but none of them was quick-witted enough to interfere.

Luke Harkness followed her.

"Have you doubted my good faith?" he cried. "Have you supposed my absence an indication of forgetfulness? Never, never! If I have been long away it meant only that my regard for you survived the blows of the Arab captor and the horrors of slavery. You—you were the light of the utter darkness which would otherwise have existed; you were the sun of my life there as you had ever been."

It was a wild, tumultuous speech, for he had forgotten that others were present, and his appeal was urged with lips which seemed unable to voice his sentiments fast enough in spite of the rapid utterance.

Then he stood with outstretched hands.

"Catholine, I am come to claim you!" he added, passionately.

He was interrupted at last. From the extremity of the room came the sound of hurried steps, and an athletic young man hastened to the side of the lady. Lightly touching one of her arms, as if to assure her of his protection, he demanded sternly:

"What means this scene? Who are you, sir?"

The abrupt challenge recalled Luke Harkness to his senses in a measure. Angered by words which were not polite or friendly he retorted:

"That is nothing to you!"

"You will find it is much," asserted the gentleman, sharply.

"Go your way. My business is with the lady."

"Wrong: it is with me. Why are you here? Why do you disturb this company of ladies and try to create alarm?"

Quickly Luke saw his error and sought to repair it.

"If I have done so I apologize to all, for such was not my intention or wish. I apologize. This being said I ask you to leave me alone with this lady."

"Why?"

"I have business with her."

"Catholine, have you anything to say to him?" asked the gentleman.

"Nothing," she replied.

"But I have something to say to her!" cried Luke. "Stand back, young man; she is nothing to you."

Promptly Catholine's defender answered:

"She is my wife!"

"What?" gasped Harkness.

"She is my wife."

"She—she—Catholine?"

The man from Africa put his hands to his head and seemed to brush a mist away. He heard; a part of the truth dawned upon him, but he was not clear of vision or mind. The blow fell so heavily that he was stunned.

The second man turned his gaze upon Catholine. He was observing enough to know there was something back of all this, and he could not understand what it was.

"Catholine, Catholine!" muttered Luke Harkness.

She had been regarding him doubtfully, closely, questioningly. Now the light broke upon her.

With surprise, but without the least evidence of pleasure or of alarm she exclaimed:

"It is Luke Harkness!"

"Ha!"

The words had conveyed much to her companion, and he turned upon the visitor a gaze no longer hostile or threatening. But the latter saw it not. He was wrestling with a revelation which made his brain whirl and unmannned him. If this was true the patience with which he had endured the suffering put upon him by the Arabs had been all in vain, and his hopes were blasted.

"Catholine," he gasped, "tell me this is not true—"

She laid her hand upon that of the man by her side.

"This is my husband, Darius Ashby," she briefly, almost pitifully interrupted.

"Married!"

"Yes."

"Great heavens—lost, all lost! Gone hope, gone the Lorrester fortune! My life and yours completely wrecked! Why could you not have waited for my return?"

Catholine's face flushed.

"There was nothing for which to wait, Mr. Harkness," she replied. "The Lorrester money did not offer any attraction to me, and I married the man I loved."

"And what of me?" wildly demanded Harkness. "You are here in luxury, but I have nothing! The Lorrester millions are lost, lost! Was it for this I held to life on the desert when death would have been a welcome relief? Was it for this I lay under bonds on heated sands and dreamed of you and my return? And now what is there for me? Lost! By heavens! I shall go mad!"

He beat his breast with his clinched hand, and shrilly added:

"I am a beggar when I might have been worth two millions!"

Darius Ashby glanced in mortification at the circle of faces which was around them, and then took the visitor by the arm.

"Mr. Harkness," he resumed, kindly, "this is a matter to be spoken of in private. Your coming is very unexpected, but I recognize your right to be heard. We will talk freely, and explain all if you will follow to my private room."

"Ashby," put in one of his guests, "do you recognize this man as the same we found with Mrs. Ashby when she swooned to-day, and to whom you gave a lesson? You may know him well enough to feel all right, but it occurs to me he may be playing a part."

Ashby looked doubtful.

"Can he be the same?"

"He is."

"I did not notice him especially, but he seems different now."

"You were too much excited to take heed of him then, but he is the same person."

"Yes," added another guest, "and I think I can see the mark on his face where you felled him then."

It was an unlucky remark, for it recalled Harkness's disgrace to his mind.

"You—you struck me?" he cried, facing Ashby.

"I am not sure—"

"I was with Catholine by the road—"

"And guilty of a despicable act!" retort-

ed the host, with sudden fire. "Yes, I do think I struck you."

"I thank you for the admission!" hotly retorted Luke. "I have sworn to annihilate the man who felled me, and I'm not sorry it is you. It is my turn now; I am here for revenge!"

CHAPTER IV.

LUKE'S HATRED.

HARKNESS had grown belligerent. As he became more clearly impressed with the idea that the great hope of his life had floated away from him, and that the man was before him who filled the place he could not fill, the desire to seek physical satisfaction upon him became a passion.

Much of this was in his manner, but Darius Ashby did not seem at all worried thereby. One thing did trouble him—the publicity that was being given to the matter.

Another person had thought of that. Among the guests was one who had rallied and spoken quietly to his companions, and they now filed away and left the principal members of the household alone with the unwelcome man from Africa.

Only Darius, Catholine and Luke remained in the room.

Ashby ignored the stranger's threat of violence, and again quietly remarked:

"This can best be talked of in private. Mr. Harkness. Will you go to a retired apartment?"

Luke hesitated for a moment, but he was clear-minded now, and he did not see that anything was to be gained by a contrary or, for the present, violent course.

"Lead on!" he directed.

"Precede us, Catholine," requested Darius.

Mrs. Ashby obeyed. Her expression was grave and pitiful. She did not like Luke and never had, but his very evident disappointment was enough to make her sorry for his sake, that so much of regret should come into his life. Well did he remember how this same matter had influenced him in the past, and one glance was enough to show that the idea had not lost power—it was plain that it had fallen with telling force when he knew of his defeat.

Darius Ashby was not so full of pity. That day he had found this man passionately kissing his unconscious wife, and the fact remained vivid. Still, there was a shadow of excuse, and the true manliness of Darius's nature came to the front and he was disposed to be patient.

At last they were all seated in a private room.

Harkness dropped down wearily, hopelessly.

Darius glanced inquiringly at his two companions, and then spoke:

"We will now hear whatever you have to say, Mr. Harkness," he announced. "I have never met you before to-day, to my knowledge, but I readily recall you as co-heir with my wife to the estate of the late Guerdon Lorrester."

"Heir to what?" bitterly retorted Luke.

"I believe it is nothing, now."

"And why?"

"Because Catholine has not filled the conditions of the old gentleman's will," returned Darius.

"No!" sharply uttered the ex-wanderer. "She has been blind to the wishes of her aged relative, and all is lost."

"You hardly expect me to sympathize with the will of Guerdon Lorrester. He had two millions. He left the money unreservedly to you and Catholine, his distant relatives, on condition that you two should marry each other. Since Catholine is my wife you cannot expect disinterested sympathy, I say."

"I don't ask it!" savagely retorted Luke. "I ask nothing of you. It was you who struck me."

"You know why."

"I did not know until I came to this house that she was married."

"Had she not been, would you have had any right to touch her lips with yours?" swiftly demanded Ashby.

"None!" asserted Catholine.

"We will let that pass," sullenly added the ex-wanderer. "The point to be considered is, what of Lorrester's millions?"

"Nobody wants them but you," answered

Catholine. "When I married I renounced all claim to them, of course."

"And left me a beggar!"

"I am sorry your ambition to acquire the money has been rendered fruitless," Catholine continued, more gently. "As to that, however, did I not always tell you that I could not consent to carry out Mr. Lorrester's wishes?"

"Yes, but—"

"Then you cannot blame me. It was Lorrester's desire that his money should be kept united by marriage between you and me. It was never my wish. The money I am not ethereal enough to despise, but the conditions I could not agree to. The second clause of his will was always the one which necessity must make the one of action."

"And now the money will go to found some confounded school!"

"As far as I am concerned, it will. If you can claim the money I shall be glad. Next to me you are the nearest relative, and you should have it, I do think."

"The will stands in the way."

"I fear it does."

"Five years old Lorrester gave us to marry and win the money. Now but eighteen months remain."

"If would be no worse if it was but a day," added Catholine, with a return of coldness.

"And I have suffered all in vain!" muttered Harkness, gloomily.

"You have been years away from me and those I know. May I ask why, if you were so set on having the fortune?"

Harkness touched his worn face.

"Have I grown old in that time?"

"You certainly have."

"Let me explain why. Hear my story. Soon after I last saw you I went, moody and disappointed, on a voyage across the Atlantic. I could make a long story of what followed, but it shall be brief."

"We were shipwrecked on the coast of Morocco, Africa, and I, one of the few survivors of the fated party, fell into the hands of the Arabs after a long tramp on foot."

"I had thought that tramp about as near perdition as life could be, but I was to learn that there could be worse. I was made a slave by my wild captors, and what I suffered no tongue can tell."

"For over two years I went with them in their wanderings, always restrained of my liberty by day and sleeping in bonds by night; and in that time I endured the pangs of the burning sun, of hunger and of thirst, and the feeling of cruel blows was known to me day by day."

"But let me not dwell on this, I say. Enough that it was an experience sufficient to drive one mad. I should have gone mad, I do believe, but I was cheered and sustained by the hope of sometime getting away; of sometime meeting *you*, Catholine."

Mrs. Ashby made a deprecatory gesture, but Harkness went on rapidly, unheeding her.

"When the torrid sun was burning my flesh, when I was lying helpless under the sullen night sky, when I was a beast of burden and the recipient of brutal blows, there was one thing to sustain me—I saw your face ever in imagination, and it kept me alive—"

"Mr. Harkness, I protest," began Catholine; but he was so much wrapped up in his subject that it was doubtful if he heard at all.

As the resistless torrent surges on so he resumed:

"Your face, and the thought of the Lorrester millions! To these things I owe my life, for I should have died otherwise. Would I have endured so much without hope of reward? Never, never! Gladly would I have died but for the hope I held."

"I lived! I was resolved to live, come what might. So passed the long period of captivity until the chance was offered to escape. I hastened to seize the chance; I fled across the desert; I met with incredible hardships and suffered a hundred deaths, but I was safe at last."

"Safe! Just Heaven! what did not that mean to me? Why? Would I have welcomed it if I had seen nothing to live for here? No, no; and that it was welcomed, was because I thought to see you and win the Lorrester fortune."

"And so when I again crossed the ocean, I saw your face by night and day, and it served to heal my shattered frame and keep me up to the work. All for you! Was it not enough to give new life to any man when he saw woman and wealth ahead as his reward?"

"Home, at last! Home, as found! What do I find?"

Luke Harkness ceased. He was on his feet and the wild deluge of words had been poured out swiftly. Many a gesture had his bony hands made, and it was an unnatural but dramatic climax when he ended by clutching at his throat with both hands as if he could not get breath.

Catholine was frightened and terribly shocked. She was a woman, and she had a woman's feeling for those in trouble. She had known him well, once, and though she had never liked him, and had always doubted his uprightness, she was deeply touched by his story and his present position.

Darius, too, was sorry, but one thing he noticed more clearly than his wife—in the same breath that the wanderer lamented the loss of Catholine he always remembered the Lorrester money.

That spoke for itself. The "love" that coupled money with itself was not of the kind to call for admiration or acute pity.

Darius saw that he had but one thing to do. Had he been Luke's dearest friend he could have done no more than to try to reconcile him to his loss. Catholine was the wife of another, and it was useless to lament weakly.

"Mr. Harkness," he began, "I clearly see that fate has dealt most unkindly with you. Dimly, it is true, but with regret I see in imagination what you have endured in your captivity, and I am sorry for you. More than that, it is harsh of fate that you should come home only to meet with disappointment. It is too late to speak of that, but I can assure you that Catholine and I will be your friends."

"Friends!" echoed Luke, bitterly.

"Yes."

"Is that what I wanted?"

"Is there anything more left?"

"If there is not then there is nothing."

"Take time to think of this, sir."

"Will it bring me the Lorrester money?"

"I am wealthy. I will gladly help you financially—"

"Never!" declared Luke, hotly.

"Would you refuse?"

"Yes; even if I starved."

"Why should you do that?"

"Not a penny would I take from the man who has robbed me of *her*!"

"Mr. Harkness, this is sudden to us all. Let us take time to think of it," patiently advised Ashby. "Make our house your home for this night, or for a few days, and then let us see what can be done—"

"Nothing can be done; I refuse all!"

Darius glanced at his wife. He had heard of Harkness often in the past and knew but little that was good of him. Then there was the scene by the roadside when Luke had been found with unconscious Catholine. Even now this event stirred Ashby's blood with indignation, but he remembered the circumstances and tried to be patient.

The man had suffered; he had met with disappointment. In his own happiness he could dimly realize what that meant. He was ready to give his help if he could.

When he looked at Catholine he had hoped for an inspiration, but he gained none. She was not in mood to advance ideas or encourage them. When she gazed at Luke's passionate face she was beset with fear for which she could not account.

Frightened, she was in dread of what Harkness might do, though she knew not why she felt thus.

Darius persevered. Patiently he assured the visitor that he would aid him in all possible ways, and tried to change the mood of the wanderer.

He scored a failure.

For a time Luke relapsed into silence. In fact, he did not hear anything that was said to him. He was busy with the new problem which had come to him. What was he to do? He did not know, but he had grown cool enough to see the need of meditation, and the place for such thought was not there.

Suddenly he rose.

"I'll go," he announced.

"Will you not remain over night with us?" persisted Ashby.

"No!"

"You will be welcome."

"No!"

At the door the wanderer turned.

"If the Arabs were here I would welcome their bonds once more!"

Turning swiftly he walked away, unheeding Darius's call to him.

Delicacy had led the guests of the house to make a clear coast, and no one intercepted him on his way out, or even saw him. He walked down the steps with a firm tread, for the iron in his nature was all to the front, and his thoughts were of anything but a peaceful kind.

"Ruined!" he muttered, bitterly. "All that I suffered on the African desert was in vain, and the Lorrester millions are still beyond my reach—they are gone forever. But are they? There is yet a year and a half ere the time will expire which the old man set for the marriage between Catholine and myself. *Is all lost?* By my life! it may not be so! Ashby and his wife exult now in my downfall, but they may hear from me again!"

Then he disappeared among the trees of the estate.

Darius and his wife were alone. Catholine regarded him with trembling face.

"What have you to say?" she asked, in a low voice.

"Merely that I regret this scene for your sake."

"You do not blame me?"

"Blame you? Why should I?"

"I never gave Luke Harkness reason to expect anything of me."

"Do you think I would believe you did?" was the surprised reply.

"I feared you might."

"I do not. Rest easy on that point. You told me all about him long ago, and this does not conflict with what you then said. He was eager to marry you because the money was at stake, and he has never given up the hope. That is not your fault."

"I refused him more than once in the past."

"It was your misfortune, not your fault, that he was not disposed to accept his fate. That point need not be discussed, my dear. Now, as to Harkness, I want to know that he leaves the premises in an orderly way, and I will go out and make sure of it."

Catholine changed color.

"Do you fear violence on his part? If so, do not go! If he should do harm to you—"

"Be at ease, Cathie. I do not fear anything of the kind, nor do I think he has the purpose to harm any one but himself. It is out, now; I think that in his keen disappointment he may do something rash to him self. That is all."

"He will not. He cannot be so—"

"My dear, we do not know to what a man thus disappointed will turn. Let me look to him in a spirit of good will, and then I shall have nothing to regret afterward. Let us not stand idle and see poor Harkness end his downfall by self-destruction. I will be gone briefly."

Darius bent and kissed his wife lightly, and then stepped out of the low window. Some of the guests were near, and one who felt that he should say something did so.

"Ashby, do we play a game of whist this evening?"

"I have another game to play first."

Darius answered curtly, for he was not pleased at being interrupted, and then he hastened away down the tree-shaded walk.

Piqued, the man who had spoken to him now added:

"He goes as if he was sent for in haste. Can it be he is going to put a quietus on the man who has made such a row here?"

The suggestion was ill-timed; and nobody replied. Like Banquo's ghost the words might reappear later.

CHAPTER V.

CAUSE FOR PERPLEXITY.

CATHOLINE had half an hour to wait for the return of her husband. When he did appear his placid face dispelled much of her fear.

"What did you see?" she asked.

"Nothing," he returned, quietly.

"Nothing?"

"Harkness must have left the premises immediately," explained Darius. "I did not see him anywhere, and that indicates that he went off without delay. I walked all around, but he was invisible."

"Then this is over," and Catholine breathed a sigh of relief.

"Let us hope so; but, Cathie, we must not let Harkness think us callous to his disappointment. If it had not been for the outrageous liberty he took when he found you unconscious by the roadside I should heartily pity him, for I can see what it is for any man to lose you!"

"It was the Lorrester money he talked about the most," practically reminded Catholine.

"Which makes it all the worse. He loses the woman he loves and the coveted money at one blow, and it falls hard. He was a scoundrel when by the road, but let us remember how suddenly it must have come upon him. If he is disposed to be decent we will do what we can for him now."

"I would much rather keep clear of him."

"We will think of it later. For let us see to our guests and make due explanation. The situation is awkward, but we can rely upon their good sense, I think."

The guests were not merely those of an evening, but New York people who were spending an indefinite period at the house of their host. As far as was known all were in sympathy with him, generally, and when he explained there was in their manner every evidence that they gave sympathetic attention.

He did not tell them that Harkness had been a lover of his wife, but did say he was an old acquaintance who had been led into exaggerated manifestations of feeling by his abrupt meeting with her after returning from a long and trying captivity among savage people.

Naturally he was not questioned, and the little he saw fit to tell was allowed to go for all.

When it was over there was a general movement to get to bed. The hour was a little earlier than usual, but all felt that it would be best to adjourn.

Soon Darius and his wife were once more alone.

"A diplomatic retreat!" observed Darius thankfully.

"Let us follow their example. I do not want any one to see me again to-night."

"We will speak to the servants and see that they close the house properly. I think John is outside. I will see."

Darius stepped out of one of the windows to the piazza. As he did so he stumbled and nearly fell over some one. He uttered an exclamation and turned.

"Who is this?" he demanded.

It was a person prone on the floor, and he bent forward.

"Heavens!" he cried, "it is Beth."

He had spoken the name of his sister, who was an inmate of the house, and it quickly brought Catholine to his side.

"What is it?" she demanded.

"It is Beth, and she seems to have fainted or—Wait! let me lift her. There! like that."

He was cooler than was to be expected under such circumstances, but there was agitation in his manner despite his nerve. To find his loved sister unconscious at his feet was no small matter.

"Mercy! what has happened?" breathed Mrs. Ashby.

"Wait!"

With arms not in the least weakened by the trying episode Darius lifted Beth and bore her to the sofa in the adjoining room. Lying there an observer would have been impressed with two facts—she was strikingly handsome and alarmingly pale.

"Is she dead?" whispered Catholine, huskily.

Darius felt of her pulse with steady hands, holding the slender wrist.

"Thank Heaven, no!" he answered. "She lives, and, I trust it is only a swoon, but—what made her faint?"

"Let me call the servants—"

"Again, wait! we do not want more of a scene here to-night. The coast seems clear; precede me and I will carry her to her own room. This done we can attend to her with-

out any outside aid if she is not seriously afflicted. Publicity should be avoided."

"Darius, do you know what made her faint?"

"I? No. Why do you think so?"

"I did not think so, except that you appeared very cool, while it seems a time when anybody would be excited and unnerved."

"That would do no good," practically answered Ashby. "I confess, though, that her condition surprised me greatly. Beth is not usually given to the showing of weakness."

He had raised the girl, and now, preceded by his wife, he carried her in. There was no encounter by the way, and they gained the upper floor unmolested. There he laid her on the bed in her own room.

He had a man's helpless feeling now that she was to be revived, and he inquired:

"What can I get for you to use?"

It was Mrs. Ashby's turn to be at home with circumstances.

"Wait a little. She gives signs of returning consciousness, and I think we need not take any further steps. Yes—see! She will soon be herself."

Despite her verdict Catholine found several of the commonplace things to do under the existing conditions, and Beth was aided somewhat to recover. This she soon did.

She opened her eyes, and the coolness that followed was surprising. A ray of wonder, a transient gleam of alarm, Ashby thought; and then she was composed enough. Her gaze was bent upon her two companions.

"What foolish thing has happened?"

It was a singular inquiry under the circumstances, but Catholine had been in the family long enough to be aware that both Darius and his sister had strength of mind and force of will very much out of the ordinary way of people.

Practical was Darius's reply:

"You fainted, Beth."

"Impossible!"

"No; it is true."

"Why should I do that?"

"Just what I wish to know."

"It must have been the heat."

"You were in the open air."

"Or the dinner."

"You ate but little."

"Well, I am very foolish, anyhow."

"Do you mean that you do not know the cause of your swoon?"

"Just that. Queer, isn't it?"

Beth laughed, and it was a very good imitation of a natural laugh, but even Catholine detected a want of amusement in it.

"Pardon me, Beth, but I am forced to the conclusion that you are hiding the truth. You are a strong, healthy girl, and such people do not faint as you did. Won't you tell what caused all this trouble?"

"I suppose all the guests are talking of it like a pack of hens," querulously muttered Beth.

"Not one of them knows of it."

"Thank Heaven!"

Beth sat up and tried to look natural.

"Yes," she pursued, "it dawns upon me that I have made myself ridiculous. If you will kindly forget all about it you will confer a favor upon me."

Darius regarded her closely.

"You can, of course, rely upon us to do all you wish, but I must ask you to pardon me when I say that there must have been a cause for this. Are we to remain ignorant of the cause?"

"Until I know, you must."

"Beth, I am not going to be obnoxious, but I think you know very well, already."

"Hear the man!" cried Beth. "When did he learn more of my affairs than I do? One would think you had some great motive at stake, or something of that sort, yourself."

"I don't understand."

"Nor I, but if you have a secret you mustn't expect me to have one!"

With this retort Beth suddenly remembered something, and she abruptly rose, went to her brother's side and put her arms around his neck. Quickly she added:

"I did not think of how you were worried by the man who came here. Of course you know I did not mean that!"

"I am well aware that you meant nothing unkind, Beth. Well, we will drop it.

Catholine, hadn't you better keep Beth company for the night?"

"Nonsense!" exclaimed Beth. "Why should she? Because I fainted?"

"Yes."

"Then let me say you can get that off your mind. I have been weak once. Natural inference: I shall not be so again. Rest easy; I am now fully myself, and I shall not be foolish again. There, leave me now; all I need is rest. Fainted? And for nothing? Yes, all for nothing!"

CHAPTER VI.

WHAT WAS FOUND IN THE BUSHES.

DARIUS ASHBY looked steadily at his sister for a moment, but no further comment was made. He knew the family force of character, and realized that it would be folly to press the matter.

Beth was left alone. The last they saw of her she was smiling quietly, but when the door closed there was a sudden change in her manner. Her easy air vanished, and a look half startled and wholly dismayed took its place.

"Oh! Heaven!" she gasped.

With her hands pressed to her heart and her attitude that of one about to flee from some danger she stood and looked, not at but toward the door. She saw nothing of what was there, but her mind's eye saw much.

"Why did I faint?" she added, unsteadily. "Oh! if they only knew!—if they knew!"

Gone was the Ashby strength of character, and she dropped into a chair and covered her face with her hands.

For a long while she sat in inactivity. That pause enabled her to recover outward calmness, and when she took the hands away there was little agitation visible. Whatever had so upset her, she had been able to recover in a measure from it.

"Why did I faint?" she repeated. "Yes, no matter what the cause of disturbance was, why should I faint? This weakness is despicable, and all on account of nothing. Why should I think of it? I will not; I will assert myself, and to-morrow I will face the greater crisis as an Ashby should. And yet, how can I meet the horror?"

Abruptly she rose and began to pace the room. Even in that hour when she was proudly calling the Ashby firmness to her aid she was very far from strong. In the past she had more than once been noted for her composure in trying circumstances.

Why should she be so weak now?

After awhile she rose, went to the open window and, putting her head half way out, listened attentively. Her gaze was directed toward the west, as if from that quarter she expected some certain sound or sight. None came; the night was quiet and peaceful.

"This will not do," she declared, presently. "My light must be out and no sign of life here. I cannot face the morrow if any one should be able to say I was late astir, and thus question me sharply."

Why? Why, since she was the strong-nerved Miss Ashby?

Shortly after the last sign of life disappeared in her room. She had retired, but it was late ere she slept. Tossing on a restless bed she passed several miserable hours before sleep came to her relief.

At the usual hour in the morning the guests assembled at the table. They came with an air as if nothing had happened. Some of them stole secret glances at the master and mistress of the house, but many were thoughtful enough to avoid even that, and there was really nothing to tell of the events of the previous evening.

In restoring the customary manner of the party Beth Ashby was of great help. She was thoroughly herself, outwardly, both in looks and conduct, and she had a lively word for all.

Thus, the breakfast was a success.

Immediately after this all adjourned to the piazza, and the brisk way in which matters progressed made it seem reasonable to suppose they were to get back on the old footing which had been interrupted by the shadow of Luke Harkness's work.

Those who had been favored with an invitation to visit the president of the Cross-

Country Club had thought themselves in rare luck, and to have it end so untimely would have been ill-fortune most melancholy.

Now, every one tried to outstrip the others in avoiding reference to the painful affair, and in seeming very gay.

This was the situation when one of the gardeners came toward the house with long, rapid steps. As he came nearer it was to be seen that his face bore a startled expression.

He had something to say, and he began without delay.

"Oh! Mr. Ashby, come with me!" he cried.

"Why?" inquired Darius, coolly.

"I want you this minute. Don't delay for a second—"

"Is anything wrong at the stable?" evenly asked Ashby, as he rose.

"Worse, far worse. It is—"

"You can tell me when we are there."

"Oh! Mr. Ashby, it's down in the bushes!"

Darius had to deal with a person too excited to heed the suggestion that he was to keep quiet. The man had no sense of prudence, and was all absorbed in his subject.

Darius was hastening down the steps.

"Take your time, James."

His advice was not heeded.

"Mr. Ashby, be prepared for it!" urged James. "There is a man dead over in the bushes there!"

James pointed to the western side of the grounds.

With lamentable want of foresight he had sprung the revelation all too soon, and everybody on the piazza heard the statement. Utter silence followed. People are not in the habit of hearing such things, and in this case there was a sort of stupor after it. The guests looked in blank silence.

"What's that?" demanded Darius.

"Somebody's dead over there."

"On our grounds?"

"Yes."

"Then say no more about it."

Ashby glanced toward his guests with an air of deep annoyance. The look was enough to dissipate any hope that they had not heard all, and he said no more. This secret was not like that which had gone before, and caution would do no good.

Yet, he hastened James away toward the spot.

"What do you mean by such stuff?" the master of the place roughly inquired.

"It's true, sir."

"Who is this dead man?"

"We don't know, sir."

"How did he die?"

"We hadn't looked, but I'm afraid he was killed, sir."

It was not very definite, but Darius did not press the question. There was a certain apathy about his manner, the result, perhaps, of the Ashby coolness, or it might have been of something else, and he had no more to say until they reached the point where another servant stood in the winding path.

He, too, seemed very much perturbed.

"What's all this, Otis?" asked Darius, quickly.

"Has James told you—"

"A part. Where is your man?"

"Here!"

Otis pushed the bushes aside, and there was then no need of repeating the last question. On the ground was the body of a man, and the white face which was upturned to the sky was assurance enough that it was the dead man of whom James had told.

Darius looked sharply.

"Do you know him?"

"No, sir. Do you?"

"No."

"He's a stranger here, I'm thinking."

"Yes."

"He ain't a tramp, sir."

"No."

"His clothes ain't as good as yours, but they're whole and quite decent, you see."

"Yes. How did he die?"

"I didn't want to look until I had witnesses."

Otis was ready to look then, and he stooped over the prostrate man.

"I ain't seen no marks of violence so far," "but I was so impressed with the notion that he wan't the sort of a person to go off the

hooks like this, naturally, that I wasn't going to be too inquisitive."

"Healthy-looking men die of apoplexy, Otis."

"So they do, sir. Now, this person— Eh? what's that?"

Otis held up his big hand, sun-brown and rough. There was a color to it now higher than ever sun put on human flesh. A red smear was on the fingers.

"Blood!" he muttered.

"What?"

"Blood, sure as you live!"

"Where did you get it?"

"Off of him!"

Otis stooped and put his hand to the dead man's chest again. It came away with a fresh stain. Then he looked up quickly.

"Mr. Ashby, he died by violence, though I can't say whether he or some one else did the work. I'll look further— Ha!" added Otis, as he stooped. "here's a bullet hole, sure as you live. Shot to his death. Whew! but this is serious business!"

"It's a murder!" declared James, "but who is he?"

"A stranger to me," answered Darius, steadily.

"Mr. Ashby, I do believe I've seen him before."

"Where?"

"At the village hotel. They said his name was Hiram Inkrod, and that he was a horse-dealer. Yes, and he was threatening you, too, sir!"

CHAPTER VII.

SUSPICIOUS OFFICERS.

DARIUS Ashby gave a start which seemed to be one of surprise.

"Upon my word, James, I think you are right as to the dead man's identity," he replied. "I had some dealings with Hiram Inkrod, and this person looks very much like him."

"Was it him you bought the mare Comet of?" asked Otis.

"Yes."

"It was because of that he was threatening you at the hotel," added James.

"Threatening me?"

"Yes."

"Why should he do that?"

"Well, Mr. Ashby, he said the mare was ruined on your hands."

"The same story he had given me before. It was not true, and I supposed he had let it drop. The man was foolish."

"How came he here?" inquired Otis.

"He said at the hotel he was coming here to force a settlement with Mr. Ashby," explained James,

"Was he intoxicated?"

"No, sir."

"Then he was crazy."

Darius was perfectly cool as he exchanged words with his men. He looked down calmly on Inkrod's still face, and took the tragedy with composure not to be expected.

"Otis," he pursued, "you had better go down to the village and get the proper official to see to this. I am uncertain who he is, but get him here with as little delay as possible."

Otis was a faithful servant, and he hesitatingly asked:

"Can't this be arranged so as to have it all quiet, sir?"

A change came over Darius's face.

"Unfortunately it is out of the question. If the man has not been murdered, he committed suicide, and the one is about as likely to stir up a disturbance as the other. No; much as I would like to see your hope realized, there is no way of keeping it still. Inkrod is dead on our premises, and we must accept the fact and see it through."

"It's too bad."

"So it is."

Darius bit viciously at his mustache. Clearly, he did not like the situation any more than his man did. Sensations of unpleasant nature were falling on his home in rapid succession.

He could plainly see that this last affair would be likely to break up his summer party, unless they developed unusual nerve.

Otis did not appear to like his task, but he soon hastened off to do his master's bidding. James kept his place, and Mr. Ashby began to pace back and forth along the path.

James watched him closely.

"He's planning to quiet the thing."

thought the servant. "He's wonderful cool outwardly, but I'll bet it upsets him sorely to have the talk about it. Yes, he's worried a good bit."

Darius suddenly stopped.

"Where were you last night, James?" he asked.

"Otis and I were playing cards in his room, sir."

"Did you hear anything out of the ordinary course of events?"

"No, but we should not be likely to at that distance, sir."

"True."

"The mansion was nearer."

"No one there heard anything, or, at least, I have not been told of it, if they did. Ordinarily, a revolver shot would be audible almost anywhere on the grounds, but we were all together last night; and, naturally, less apt to hear it."

"He ain't the sort of a man to commit suicide, is he?"

"I should say not."

"Especially as he was in these parts to force you to a settlement, as he termed it."

"The man was preposterous. He had a horse and I asked him to let me take it on trial. I saw it, and knew it was a good animal, but the question was, would it do for cross-country riding? That could be settled by trial only. He sent it to me, and I found it broken down. Of course I sent it back. Inkrod accused me of injuring it, which was not true. He wanted me to pay damages. Naturally, I refused. That's all there was to it."

"Yet, he was around to see you again about it, and he was doing some loud talk at the hotel."

"Threatening me, eh?"

"Yes."

"How?"

"He declared he would have the original price of the mare, or 'whip the skin off from your bones!' I remember the exact expression, because it was so eccentric."

"Mr. Inkrod was inconsiderate," calmly observed Darius. "He had no cause to feel so hard toward me. If the horse went back to him in poor condition it was because it reached me in the same way; and if it originally left him all right his agent ruined him on the way here."

Darius discussed the matter as precisely as if Inkrod was alive and waiting to see him again, and James was filled with admiration for such coolness.

In due time Otis returned, and with him were two men. They proved to be the coroner and a local detective, this being the force which was first aroused.

They gave attention to the dead man, and it was found that Inkrod had received a revolver shot straight through the heart. He must have succumbed quickly to such an injury, and this accounted for the fact that there had been no struggle.

The detective, Jonas Swanden, continued to search the ground near at hand, but Coroner Paulsley gave attention to Darius.

"How do you account for this, Mr. Ashby?" he inquired.

"I don't account for it."

"Was it suicide?"

"There is no revolver here."

"That tells the story. Then he was murdered."

"So it seems."

"He was the man you had some horse dealings with. What do you know of him?"

"No more than that."

"But where did he live?"

"I can't even tell you that, definitely. He was of New York City, or so it was represented. I heard of him through a friend of mine who, knowing I wanted a good running horse, told me he knew of a person named Peter Brand, more commonly called Plunger Pete, who could possibly help me. Brand was a follower of the races, and my friend thought he must know of some such animal as I wanted. My friend saw Brand, and, soon after, Inkrod put in an appearance. He referred to himself as a friend of Brand's."

"Where does Brand live?"

"In New York."

"Yes, but his address?"

"I don't know. Possibly my friend does, though it may not be so easy to find Brand elsewhere as at the races."

"He deals in that vicious calling, does he?"

"Haunts the tracks all the time, I was told. He bets heavily, as his sobriquet of 'Plunger Pete' indicates. I know no more of him."

"Well, the main thing is to know how Inkrod died. What do you find, Swanden?"

"Nothing!"

"No tracks?"

"The path here, is too flint-like, with its prepared surface, to allow a foot to make an impression. Outside there is just as little. I find no sign."

"Bad!"

"Inkrod seems to be lying where he fell. Observe that the bushes are a bit torn, though he did not struggle. Beyond doubt he was standing in the path when he was shot. He fell over into the bushes. Whoever did the deed left him just as he fell, indifferent to the fact that he had a dead man on his hands, I should say."

"Mr. Ashby," pursued Paulsley, "your man tells me that nobody heard the revolver shot. Is that true?"

"As far as I know, it is."

"Also, that Inkrod was not seen here."

"As far as I know, he was not."

"He came to meet you."

"I did not see him."

Detective Swanden looked meditatively at the master of the place.

"He came threateningly to do you mischief, too."

"He did not do it, for the good reason I did not see him."

"If it had been one of your men I should say he met the person he aspired to see, and got the worst of it" dryly added Swanden.

Darius regarded his companion calmly.

"I do not believe any inmate of my houses harmed him," was the steady reply.

"I did not mean to intimate that it was so," answered Swanden, unhesitatingly.

At the constable's suggestion the men separated and proceeded to look for further signs. The grounds were thoroughly searched, but no call from any quarter summoned the rest. Swanden worked around to where he could speak privately with Paulsley.

"What do you think of this?" he asked, abruptly.

"I can see no light, thus far," returned the coroner.

"Looks bad for Ashby, don't it?"

"Do you suspect him?"

"Why did Inkrod come here?"

"True."

"I make no charges, so see that you keep still on that head."

"Of course."

"He came here threatening to chastise Ashby. Now he is found dead on Ashby's grounds."

"I didn't think Ashby was that kind of a man."

"Be prudent, Paulsley. Much is to be done, yet. I know Ashby carried a revolver. The caliber may be the same as that which killed the horse-dealer. Say not a word, however."

Darius approached, and the discussion was dropped. The detective had a measure of shrewdness, and he talked with Darius without betraying what was in his mind. Coroner Paulsley regarded the wealthy man with critical eyes. Was he looking upon a murderer? It seemed hard to believe, but Paulsley, while he had seen but little experience in the line of his office, was world-wide enough to be aware that the annals of crime told of more than one rich man who had taken human life.

Perhaps he had killed Inkrod in the heat of passion.

"Be that as it may," thought the official, "the evidence all points in one direction just now. Murder has been done, and it would be wild to say that Ashby is not the focus of the suspicion. If he is guilty we will have him in our net soon!"

CHAPTER VIII.

PLUNGER PETE

THE guests at the Ashby house were in a state of profound helplessness that day. They sympathized fully with their entertainers, but the ordinary means of showing sympathy failed in such a crisis. It had been bad enough when Luke Harkness had come

so roughly to cast the first sign of trouble into their coterie, but it was nothing in comparison with the latest development.

In a short time everybody knew all about it, even to the fact that Inkrod had left the hotel with the avowed purpose of chastising Darius.

Suggestive fact! It was commented upon with all the rest, though not one of the people ventured to express the possibility that occurred to him. Had he done so he would have said:

"Who should kill Inkrod unless it was the man who is known to have had trouble with him?"

Something else was remembered, too.

They were told that Inkrod had left the hotel at a time a little later than they personally knew Harkness had arrived at the Ashby house; and it was remembered that Darius followed Harkness soon after the latter's departure, and was absent some minutes.

This was recalled, but no one hazarded a comment as to what it might indicate.

Thus, among the guests there was much thinking, but very little spoken which Darius would have been annoyed to hear. They were faithful friends.

The official history of the day may be told in few words. The body was carried to the village, and the official workers did much traveling and investigating. Yet, when night fell they had made no arrests, and did not pretend to say whom they believed guilty.

Late in the day a deputation of the guests waited on Darius with a question. Would he prefer to have them go or stay? They would be glad to aid him all they could, but possibly they would be in the way at such a crisis. Would he enlighten them as to their proper mode of procedure?

He did so.

"Stay!" he replied, promptly. "This affair is most unfortunate, but let no one go if he can endure it here."

That settled it. They remained.

In the evening they gathered on the piazza and in the parlor, and a desperate effort was made to be natural. There were, however, some faces in the party which were so marked by the shadow of the tragedy that they were very noticeable. Oddly enough, the one who showed this most was strong-nerved, self-reliant Beth Ashby.

Darius was guilty of decided annoyance as he saw how nervous she was. He said nothing, but he wondered why she could not be calm at a time when calmness was so essential.

The evening waned. The party was keeping up the show of being at ease, and succeeding fairly well. Those who were on the piazza heard footsteps approaching. They came nearer—firm steps on the gravelled walk. A man came into sight.

He walked on, reached the piazza and mounted the steps. He stood among the guests.

They returned his gaze and saw a man of about thirty years. He did not impress them as being one of a high rank in life. He hardly looked aristocratic, and his face was more good-natured than intellectual. He had a round, chubby form, too, which was commonplace, and rendered all the more so by clothes which were not elegant.

This man took off his hat politely and bowed to the party.

"This is Mr. Ashby's residence, is it not?" he inquired, in a singularly musical voice.

"Yes, somebody replied.

"Is he present?"

"You may find him inside."

"Thanks. I'll try."

The stranger's manner was as easy as if he had dropped in among neighbors, and this did not please them. He had a good-natured, familiar way which they resented. Thus, when he started forward another speaker curtly added:

"It would be well to send your card."

"Thanks; it's not necessary."

Calmly confident he walked inside the door. He was then in the hall, with a room on either side of him. He hesitated for a moment, but, seeing one or more persons on either side, concluded that it did not matter and turned to the left.

The room he now entered was an adjunct to the parlor, and but little used. It so happened, now, that Beth Ashby was its only

occupant. She heard his step; she turned; she stood facing him.

He stopped short.

Until that moment his manner had remained as easy as ever, but it proved that the armor had its weak point. He lost his careless air as suddenly as the flash of lightning. Over the face came the unmistakable aspect of deep surprise, and this was followed by something like startled dismay.

Panorama-like was that face for a brief time then he abruptly moved forward.

"Beth!" he exclaimed, in a low, intense voice. "Beth, is it you?"

There was no reply. Miss Ashby stood confronting him, but with emotion even deeper than his own. Her cheeks had grown pallid, and her appearance was that of positive terror.

"My God!" she gasped, "are you here?"

"Yes, but I—"

"You are mad!"

"Mad? Why? But I need not ask," and there was a trace of resentment in his manner now. "Do not fear; I am not here to claim you."

"Go, go!"

"Am I so obnoxious?"

"You promised not to intrude upon me."

"So I did, and this was an accident. I did not know you were here. So you are a guest—"

"Will you go?"

"Pardon me; I do not see the need of haste."

"Would you ruin me?"

"Ruin you! And I am—what I am!"

"I know what you are!" Bert cried, in an intense voice.

"You ought to."

"Will you go?" demanded Beth, feverishly. "If you are blind to every dictate of self-preservation you ought, at least, to spare me the revelation which must come. Go, go!—too late!"

This exchange of words had not taken the time which would naturally be expected. Both of the two, and especially Beth, had spoken very rapidly, and the time consumed was but a trifle.

Feverish had been the talk, too, and Beth had cast more than one worried glance toward the door. Her last words were plain when it was seen that another person had entered—one of the guests. He, however, had been able to hear nothing, for Beth had watched too sharply for him to get the time.

The stranger was quick-witted, and her closing words enabled him to grasp a good deal. He turned and saw the intruder.

He was equal to the occasion. His manner grew as cool as manner could be, and with the old, careless smile he added:

"Yes, miss, if you will kindly show me where Mr. Ashby is I shall be much obliged."

She hesitated, but the third person helped that out.

"I will call him," he said, and turned away.

Alone with the stranger once more Beth spoke eagerly:

"Will you not go away?"

"Pardon me; I am not here to injure you," replied he. "Be calm; the world will know nothing from me."

"Then go!"

"One second. Can I see you outside the grounds to-night?"

She hardly realized what the request meant—realized but little except, as she thought, that it was of vital importance that some sort of understanding should be reached at once to keep this man from betraying her in the presence of others.

"Yes, yes!" she replied.

"Where?"

"Anywhere."

"The hour—the place!"

Footsteps sounded in the hall.

"By the largest tree back of the house."

"Enough! Now be calm."

Darius Ashby entered.

Until all was settled the visitor had been for the last few minutes very sharp of utterance and to the point, though not hostile. Now, the old careless expression was on his face, and he turned toward the door with all the ease imaginable.

He bowed.

"Mr. Ashby?"

Darius saw nothing in the polite stranger to rouse worry, and Beth had concealed her

own face by making a pretense of looking elsewhere.

"That is my name," answered Darius.

"Mine," explained the stranger, "is Peter Brand."

Ashby start'd a little. He was not slow to remember the name, and he knew that the "Plunger Pete" who had figured in the attempted horse-purchase was with him.

"I have heard of you, sir."

"You once applied to me concerning the racer 'Comet.'"

"Yes."

Darius eyed Brand closely. What did the visit portend? Brand was a friend of Hiram Inkrod. Had he come to make himself obnoxious?

"I did not think, then, that we should meet under circumstances like the present," added Brand, gravely.

"How do we meet?"

"I refer to the death of my friend Inkrod."

"Yes?"

"I called because he was my friend. I happened to be in this neighborhood—arrived a few minutes ago—and I dropped in."

"It must have been a severe blow to you."

"It was," admitted Peter, "but it is appointed for all men to die once. Some get a little ahead of time, and then they think they have hard luck. I suppose that is so. We who are left always manage to drag along without them. I don't imagine any one will care when I shuffle off the mortal coil"—here he swept a quick, non-committal glance toward Beth—"but Hiram will be missed."

"It gives me deep regret that it should happen on my grounds; as well," added Darius, suddenly, "that it should happen at all."

"No doubt."

"Did you come with him?"

"No; I came later. If I had been along with him it might not have occurred. Anger is natural to men, and trouble will occur when one does not keep his passions in check. I believe there was some trouble between you and Hiram, and that he had threatened you?"

CHAPTER IX.

A MAN WHO IS WELL HATED.

DARIUS ASHBY straightened himself up without being aware of the act. It was significant that this friend of Inkrod's came and, at the outset, began to speak of the trouble of the past, and he involuntarily prepared for a battle of wits.

"I have heard," he quietly answered, "that Mr. Inkrod made some hostile talk at the hotel, but there was no occasion for it."

"He thought you guilty of injuring the horse Comet."

"Yes."

"I know the man by whom he sent Comet to you," declared Brand. "He was not one to be trusted. If he had injured the horse on the way he would never have said so. Poor Inkrod could see only one side of the matter."

"So it seems."

"By whom do you think he was killed?"

Plunger Pete's gaze had been wandering. Now it came up with a swift change and was fastened on Darius's face.

"I have no theory, for I did not know he was near until he was reported to me as dead."

"Poor fellow!"

"Doubtless you can tell us where to look for his personal friends and relatives. Can you?"

Peter shrugged his shoulders.

"He was a horseman."

"What does that mean?"

"That he had no friends. A horseman is deserted by all but the boon companions of his erratic life. They are associates, not friends. So Inkrod was fixed; I do not know that he had any relative, while his sole friends are the negative friends, as I may call them, who pulled the same string with him at the track or in the stable."

"They are better than nothing, and the coroner deserves to learn of all such friends."

"Will there be an inquest?"

"Of course."

"Even to a horseman?"

Again Peter looked quickly toward Beth, after which he added:

"There is some luck even for Inkrod's kind. Deserted by his friends in life he had the coroner for a friend when he is dead!"

Beth had not looked at the pair once during their conversation. Now she bestowed a quick glance upon the speaker. Apparently the thrust was intended for her, and was duly felt.

"Mr. Brand," continued Darius, "will you go with me to a private room? I should like to talk of this further."

"Willingly."

Peter rubbed his smooth face as if ironing out the expression of uncertainty which had come there, and then concluded:

"Willingly, for I cannot take my train now. It is not essential that I leave your house before ten. At that hour I must go."

A sidelong glance toward Beth, and then the repetition:

"At ten!"

The Plunger was nothing if not wily. He had talked to Darius for Beth's ears, but words and glances had alike been so ordered that there was nothing for Darius to catch and build upon. Observing as the latter was he did not suspect any understanding or acquaintance between Brand and Beth.

Darius had turned to lead the way to the private room, and after that reminder Peter turned also. He did not again look at Miss Ashby, and both men soon receded from her view.

Left alone she lost control utterly for a moment, and her trembling lips betokened keen mental anguish. To her the presence of Peter Brand meant something far out of the ordinary—how much it meant her aristocratic friends would have been astonished to learn.

"He lies!" she suddenly breathed; "he has not come with the object he says. No commonplace inquiry has he to make for Hiram Inkrod, and even if he had—Oh! merciful Heaven! how can I meet all this?"

There was a stir on the piazza, as if some of the guests contemplated entering the house, and she stirred to life with the instinct of self-preservation.

"They must not see me; I cannot bear it now!" she thought, excitedly.

It was easy to avoid a meeting. The door at the further end of the room furnished a way, and she improved it without delay. From the vicinity where she would be likely to encounter any of the party she made her way to her own room on the upper floor.

There she dropped, rather than sat down in a chair.

"He, here!" she murmured, brokenly.

A chorus came to her ears from the piazza; the mingled laughter of all who were there.

"They are happy. What am I?"

This woman was in a desperate mood. No imaginary phantom was she conjuring up from her mind; she knew of what she spoke, and knew that the next few minutes might bring her to a desperate pitch, indeed.

"Will he tell?" she continued. "He would not if he was aware that I knew so much, but he does not know, and he is capable of anything. Will he tell Darius? If he does—"

Her voice died away, but her nervousness did not. She could not endure inactivity, and she rose abruptly and went to the window. It was a point which gave her ample view of the surroundings of the house, and like a ghost came one thing to her. Back where she could not see the trunk, but distinguishable because of the branches it flaunted to the wind, was a tree that came to her vision unsought for and unwelcomed.

It stood where Hiram Inkrod had died.

She shrunk back.

"Even that is thrust into my face now!" she exclaimed. "Why am I doomed to know how he died?"

The cool air by the window fanned her feverish face, and it did more. The future might have almost anything in store for her, but there was momentary repose of a kind, and it served to give her time to collect her thoughts and energies.

"This is weakness," she murmured. "The swimmer who will not struggle in the hour of danger is not the one who is saved. I must rally. While there is life there is hope. Let me be myself again."

The Ashby blood was reasserting itself,

and she crushed down all weakness and prepared for the future.

"I will see him when he comes out, and possibly I may buy him off. Ah! I have never tried that, but he would, I am sure, sell his soul for money. It would be like him."

Impressed with this idea she made a light and looked to her financial resources. She had no large sum of money with her, but what she did have she put in her purse. Then she sat down to wait, growing cooler each moment, and gaining the strength she needed for the battle she believed ahead of her.

Time passed. It neared the hour of ten.

Donning a dark outer garment she passed out of the house and toward the largest tree that grew in the grounds. No one intercepted her, and the place was reached uneventfully.

She waited.

"Will he come?"

The inquiry was always in her mind. It was an interview of his own seeking, but she was not sure of him. For gain or revenge she believed he would ignore all promises to her and avoid the meeting.

Ten—and past. A step on the walk!

"Somebody is coming."

She stood ready to stay or flee, but there was no need of the latter. She recognized the short, stout figure of the Plunger, and then he advanced rapidly.

"Have I kept you waiting?" he asked, with an appearance of solicitude. "I am sorry—"

"You have come, at last."

"Yes, and I should have been here before had I been able to leave Mr. Ashby sooner."

"What have you said to him?"

"We talked of Hiram Inkrod."

"What else?"

"Nothing."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes."

"You did not yield to the temptation so common to you and strike me? Are you sure?"

Resentfully replied the Plunger:

"Am I a coward?"

"You are all else. Why not that?"

He sighed. She believed it a hypocritical sigh, but it was unchallenged. Soberly he returned:

"Do you feel sure you are doing me no injustice? When have I ever won the right to be called a villain such as you point me?"

"We waste words. Do you swear to me you have betrayed nothing to my brother?"

"I swear; I have said nothing. Beth, I am—"

"You shall not call me by my Christian name!" she flashed.

"As you will. To-night," added Peter, with a turn of resentment, "it has been my fortune to know the name by which your father was called. He was Conrad Ashby; of course you are Miss Ashby. Well, though I know more of your history than ever before, I am not any more your enemy, and that I never was."

"That is not necessary."

"Witness my conduct to-night. I came here and, for the first time, discovered who you really were. Did I turn against you? Did I publish the fact that I even knew you? It was something to me to know what I did not know before—your name—but I was silent? Why do you proclaim me your foe?"

Beth was quiet for a time. There had been every appearance of feeling in the appeal, but that did not move her.

"What do you want?" she asked, presently.

"I asked for this interview because I wanted to speak with you once more. I had thought we might never meet—"

"Dare you say you did not know I was here?"

"I do say it."

"Then your coming is mysterious."

"You heard me tell Ashby why I came."

"You said you had just arrived."

"Yes."

"Suppose you are caught in the lie?"

"Lie?"

"That was the word."

Plunger Pete moved restlessly.

"Your words are harsh."

"They are true."

"What do you know of my having been here before?"

Beth leaned forward and deeply demand-ed:

"What do you know of how Hiram Inkrod died?"

CHAPTER X.

DARIUS IS WARNED.

PLUNGER PETE was calm under the inquiry.

"I do not know how Hiram Inkrod died," he responded, "but I am here to learn. I have talked with your brother, but have gained next to no light. Who killed him? This is what I am desirous of learning. I called him my friend. He was a rough man who could not fill anybody with admiration, but death levels all distinctions. Dead, he is as deserving as any one. I intend to know how he died, if I have to act the detective, myself."

Beth quickly retorted:

"Admirable actor!"

"What do you mean? I am weary of random remarks. Come to the point and let me know—"

"You and I can tell each other but little. Study on that," added Beth, impressively. "Consider what it is when I say you can tell me but little. Think of it!"

Peter sighed.

"You keep me all at sea, and I will not press it. Have you anything special to say?"

"No."

"Beth," pursued the Plunger, earnestly, "has time made you see things in a way at all different—"

"No!" was the quick reply.

"You still abhor me?"

"The word is yours, but it is not exaggerated."

"It is a pity," admitted Brand, gloomily, "that we ever met. If the Lord would slay on the spot all people who are to bear an evil influence upon each other, when they first meet, it would be a good thing all around."

"True!"

"I have been thinking of this a good deal of late."

"You should have thought sooner. Possibly your commendable wish would have been attended to properly;"

"Beth, you are remorseless."

"Remorse! He talks of that!" murmured the girl, bitterly.

"Have I not tried to do all I could? Have I not let you alone?"

"Why?"

"Because I would not harm you for my life."

"Indeed?"

There was a bitter unbelief in almost every word she uttered, and the patience of the man suddenly wavered. He drew himself up with proud resentment.

"Sneer all you will; I care not!" he cried. "The time has passed when you could touch me. I disdain you as much as you do me."

"Then we are both satisfied."

"I am not. I regret the ruin of both our lives, but I shall never seek to have it otherwise. Rest easy; my hand is still—as still as if I were dead. The secret will never be told."

"Why?"

"Because of what you were."

"Or fear?"

"Fear?"

"That was the word."

"Whom do I fear?"

"Justice, possibly."

"You will have to explain."

"How did Inkrod die?"

"I know not. Do you?"

"No more than you!" retorted Beth.

"I am in the dark. Do you accuse me?"

"I accuse nobody. Of course as he was your friend you would not harm him—you loved him too well. But, I ask you again, how did he die? You need not answer. Let the subject drop."

"I will," sharply answered Peter. "I am tired of looking to you for common-sense. Miss Ashby, in yonder house you have friends of your own rank in life—'swell' friends; trusty friends; honorable friends. Go to them; the despised sport who plays the races is not good enough for you to associate

with, I know. Go to the primped darlings who are dearer than all others. I am done!"

He ceased and, folding his arms over his chest, took on an air anything but friendly, himself.

"When do I hear from you again?" Beth asked.

"Never!"

"Wrong! We shall meet again; meet as enemies; and it will be you who will force the battle which will come between us!"

"I care not if it be so. I shall try no more to do good to you. The secret you are so anxious to preserve will not be revealed by me. So much I promise because you are a woman. More I will not promise to one who is my bitter foe. I am done. Good-by!"

He turned and went a few steps, and then paused. He looked back to Beth, but she was already moving toward the house. Knowing that she must be aware of his halt he gave up hope then, and walked swiftly toward the public street.

Beth hastened on until she reached the house. Again she was fortunate, for she was able to enter without being seen by any one. She did not seek to mix with the guests that night, but went at once to her own room.

There she sunk into a chair with a weary sigh.

"The same man; the same hardened wretch!" she murmured. "He dared not face the worst charge I brought against him."

The expression would have been somewhat enigmatical to a stranger who had only the conversation to go by, but she had definite views and understandings of all.

She condemned Peter Brand utterly; she found no good in him, and much that was evil.

The eventful day was past, but, if every one was like Beth, there was not much sleep in the house that night. Long after she was usually asleep she tossed on her bed. For reasons best known to her the life which was hers had been gloomy for some time, and now it was worse than usual.

She dreaded to meet the future.

Morning dawned. It was a day which had been set for a ride "cross-country" some days before, but the projected pleasure was not referred to by anybody. There was a cloud on the house and its inmates, and the desire to be merry was gone. Rough as Hiram Inkrod had been he had been a man, and his untimely fate worried all.

During the forenoon there was the bustle among the local authorities which was to be expected. They were all around the premises, and the guests could not go out without stumbling upon them.

All this had a result. The guests called a meeting, and they were unanimous in the expression of opinion that it would be best for them to end their sojourn at the house—at least, until the cloud was lifted from the place.

A chosen committee went to Darius Ashby with this decision. He heard them quietly.

"I believe you are right," was his comment. "I am so far convinced of it that I shall, myself, wind up my season here at once. We might ignore all and live on as we are, but I find that the regular dwellers of the town have a feeling that there should be no merry-making after what has occurred. Our period set apart for sport wanes, anyhow. It may be well for us all to get away, and I shall send my wife and sister to New York shortly. I shall nominally follow, but I must give enough time to this place so it will not be said I have deserted it wholly."

So it was settled, and the guests made good use of their release.

They beat the retreat in a body.

On a train which was not far behind theirs went Catholine and Beth, as well as the servants, as a rule, and Darius was left with only one person to keep him company in the house—Otis.

It was the evening of the first day alone that Darius was sitting on the piazza when a figure came up the walk. With a straightforward air it advanced until Ashby recognized one of the men who had been his neighbors in the country. This person was not the most refined of the lot, but a rather dirty old fellow who had a habit of chewing tobacco and volleying the juice at everything in his reach.

"Good-evening, Mr. Jenkins!" saluted Darius.

"Good-evenin'!" growled Jenkins.

"I am glad to see you, for I am keeping lonesome vigils now."

"I ain't sure I understand that way o' puttin' it, but they say the rest have skipped."

"All gone."

"When do you do it?"

"Do what?"

"Skip!"

"I am not going to skip."

Jenkins took a long-distance tobacco shot at a shrub by the piazza.

"You'd better!" he replied.

"I fail to understand."

"You'd better skip."

"Why?"

"Detective Swanden an' the rest will nab you yit."

"Nab me? Why should they do that?"

"Ef you don't know I'll tell ye. You are liable ter git pulled in fer killin' Hi Inkrod!"

Darius began to see. He regarded his grim and unconcerned companion with real or feigned surprise.

"You surely are joking, Mr. Jenkins."

"Ef I be, I don't know et. Ef you are skeptikel on these points, jest send your man down ter the village on the quiet an' let him do a little listenin' when he ain't known ter be around. He will soon git onter the sentiments o' the people, and when they *hev* sentiments, you can rest assured they an' Swanden *hev* taken snuff out o' the same box. Yes, et is ginerally believed it was you who killed Inkrod."

"Why, this is preposterous!" cried Darius.

"Mebbe you can convince them."

Grim and unconcerned was the citizen's utterance. He rose from the chair calmly.

"I'm goin'," he announced. "I ain't wholly in love with the folks around here, an' I thought I would drop in an' tell ye how things was goin'. Inkrod came here with threats against you on his lips, an' he was done up. Folks say, 'Ef Ashby didn't kill him, who did?' That's all, except that I advise you to skip."

"I shall not!" declared Darius. "I did not harm Inkrod, and I will not run away. After to-morrow I shall divide my time between this place and my city home, but I shall at all times be accessible to anybody who wishes to see me."

"That's your hunt, not mine. It ain't any o' my business, an' I don't care a rap. My advice, though, is that you skip!"

The last words were said from the foot of the steps, and then Mr. Jenkins hastened away toward the road.

CHAPTER XI.

SILKY IS HEARD FROM.

AMONG its guests the Hotel Noble, in the city of New York, numbered Mr. Peter Brand. At that place no one was more highly thought of than Peter. Proprietor, fellow-guests, servants and transient customers united in bestowing their good-will on Peter.

He was a sail-fellow-well-met, without the usual vices of such men. He never drank to excess; he was always mild of manner, and never quarreled with anybody; he used all with consideration, and was a star in his social circle.

Be it known that the circle was not of the best. Peter was a "sport," and his associates were of the same order. His income was derived from "playing the races," and this he did with a mild recklessness which had gained for him the name of "Plunger."

A bold risker, he was also a lucky risker, and his fame was wide among sporting men.

His companions were in the same class, but not of the same caliber. They were not gifted with his good qualities, and they had, as a rule, all the bad ones that man could have. They drank too much; they were boisterous; they were out to win, whether the necessary means were honest or not, and now and then they disappeared for awhile from public view, and it was known they had taken quarters in some jail, police station-house, or, in some cases, the confines of Sing Sing.

These men were the associates of Peter Brand. His calling as a race-track frequenter brought him in contact with them, though not in positive friendship, and he did not seek them.

Neither did he avoid them, or seek to do so. By living at the Hotel Noble he made frequent meetings with them sure. This he regarded as all right, and this branded Peter as a citizen who did no great credit to himself or his city.

In brief, he was an honest man, a "square sport," and a peaceable resident, but the life he had chosen would have left him outside the pale of respectability whether he had made strenuous endeavors to stay within it or not.

Nothing very bad was known of him; little good was known of him, according to a strict rule of life.

One evening shortly after the scenes at Ashby's a note was brought to Peter as he sat with the crowd in the hotel. He opened it and read as follows:

"PETE:—Shy yourself over here this eve and see us. Midget wants too see you, and I want a tip on the races. Don't fail, or Midget will be in a mess and I shall suffer.

"SILKY SHAW."

Mr. Brand put the paper away.

"From your lady-love?" asked a fellow sport.

"No!"

It was not a genial reply, for the question had not pleased Peter. He rose to leave.

"Tell that to the marines!" scoffed the questioner. "A man don't get so speedy a move on unless the call is from his best girl."

"You've taken a 'long shot' and got left a furlong from the wire," retorted Peer.

He did not like the interference of his companion. Banter the Plunger rarely indulged in, and never when woman was at stake. Undesirable points he might have, but he remembered his mother. Remembering her, he would not trifle with the name of any other woman.

The person in the hotel had touched him more closely than he knew. With the haste of the joker he had touched the best point in Pete's nature. The sport had a life not carried on the surface, and it was what was brought up by the note from "Silky Shaw."

Reaching the street the Plunger walked briskly for several blocks. He brought up at a house on a humble street and rung the bell. Being admitted he went unushered to a room on the second floor.

He knocked.

"Come in!" cried a voice.

He entered.

He was in a room better in all ways than was to be expected of that locality. Fairly well furnished, it was so adorned with the little odds and ends that tell of woman's handiwork that it was bright and becoming.

The woman was there, but not alone. She had a male companion. The sharp eyes of Peter Brand took all this in, and then he had to accept a warm greeting, especially from the male occupant.

"Glad to see you, old man!" declared that person. "You are as welcome as the sun after the rain, or words to that effect. Shy your derby under the table, or anywhere you please. It's awfully good to see you, you know. Eh, Midget?"

This speaker, who was none other than the "Silky Shaw" who had written the letter, was unwilling to give any one else chance to say a word, but he finally did so, mentally complimenting himself on his self-denial as he ceased to fill the floor. Brand's gaze had wandered from him to his female companion, and he now advanced with extended hand.

"Good-evening, Merry," was his greeting.

"Good-evening, Pete," she answered.

It was not a meeting after a long separation, for they all met often, and the greetings had little ceremony. All sat down, and their manner betokened friendship and social ease.

Silky Shaw was a youth of about sixteen years, while Merry was two years older. A boy and a girl of more than common appearance, though neither had any pretense to aristocratic looks or birth.

Peter Brand was the good angel of both. Four years ago he had saved Merry from a street-life of hardship, peril and misery—saved her when her mother, her last remaining relative, died and left her utterly friendless.

Merry was then a ragged, dirty child, but

Peter saw in her something too good for the ominous life which menaced her. He took her, dressed her comfortably, fed her and found a home for her, all at his own expense.

This done, he wondered how he was to continue with her.

On a street-corner near his hotel he often bought a paper of a certain ragged boy. He knew this boy could dance like an artist, for he had seen him do it. One day he discovered that Merry had the making of a dancer in her. He had an idea.

For his own amusement he brought the boy there, and had them dance together.

From this much had grown. Under his tuition they grew skillful, and, aided by him, they went on until, now, they were numbered among the stars of the variety stage. As Silky Shaw and Midget Merry they were well known.

Such was the pair he was now visiting—persons bound to him by every tie of gratitude, and filled with the impression that he was the best as well as the greatest of men.

Plunger Pete had never removed the idea.

His wards had outgrown rags, and becoming clothes and bright faces now made them attractive.

A little general conversation took place now, and then Brand asked:

"Anything new?"

"Something glorious, Pete!" declared Silky Shaw, with a laugh.

"A good money offer?"

"It's not a matter of money."

"What, then?"

"Love!"

"Indeed!" replied Peter, smiling. "Is it you or Merry that has made the conquest?"

"Neither."

"Then who is it?"

"You!"

"Nonsense, Silky!"

"When a young female seeks an interview with you it is just about all I say."

"You will have to explain yourself."

Peter was smiling good-naturedly, for he did not suppose the talk had any more meaning than a joke on the part of the frivolous Silky, but he was to be enlightened.

"I am with you," responded Silky. "Why are you here? We sent for you. Why did we send for you? Because a young lady has requested us to help her see you. Why have we done this? Because we like to help the cause of true love along."

"More muddy than ever. I don't see at all."

"I will make it clear," quickly replied Merry. "A young lady has come to me and asked for your address. I hesitated to give it, and then she inquired if she could not have an interview with you here. I do not know whether we have done right to comply with her request, but she is coming, and if you don't want to see her there is still time for you to go before she comes."

"Upon my word! And who is she?"

"She gave no name."

"What does she want?"

"I do not know."

"Nor I. I am not in the habit of having young women ask to see me, not being a ladies' man. Coming here, eh? Well, I suppose I shall have to see her."

"A nice way to try and make us believe you are not in it. We know you are. Why, Merry is that jealous she would pull your hair for a penny," averred Silky.

"I am not!" declared Merry, warmly.

"Well, no doubt you have cause to be."

"I guess Mr. Brand has a right to see a lady if he wishes!" defiantly added the girl.

"Well, I should tremulo!" agreed Silky.

Peter was not enlightened, and he had many questions to ask, but his friends could not help him much. The lady in question had come to their rooms, seen Merry and asked to see Peter. They had agreed to help her and the sport had been sent for. If he desired there was a chance for him to meet her, or he could avoid it by going away.

He decided to stay.

Thus decided, Silky suddenly changed the subject.

"Who is going to win, to-morrow, Pete?" he inquired.

"Where?"

"Anywhere you please. I've been poring over the papers all the evening, and try-

ing to make up my mind where I can safely deposit a few lonesome dollars. I have studied weights, tried to recall previous runnings, made wild guesses as to what horses are 'sprinters' and what ones are stayers in a long race, but I'll be durned if I don't feel all at sea. Horse-racing is mighty uncertain."

"That's true," agreed Brand.

"My head is full of Lamplighter, Race-land, Banquet, Domino and Dobbins, but the whole gang may get whipped for all I know. Shall I take a favorite, with one hundred and thirty up, or a rank outsider with a measly one hundred? Come, I want your gigantic intellect on this!"

"Hush!" whispered Merry.

"What?"

There was a knock at the door.

CHAPTER XII.

AN OFFERED BRIBE.

"THE beautiful unknown comes!"

With this comment Silky Shaw hurried to the adjoining room, leaving Merry and Plunger Pete to face the next move in the game.

"Shall I open the door?" inquired Merry.

"Yes," replied Pete.

The girl obeyed. She opened the door and a second girl became visible—a girl dressed in very different style from Merry, and one whose air was that of a person whose rank placed her in a different class than that filled by the variety performer. She spoke at once.

"Has Mr. Brand—"

She stopped short. She had looked beyond Merry, and the latter did not need to ask why she stopped; she had seen Pete.

Merry turned. She fixed her own gaze on the Plunger, and it was one full of inquiry. Plainly, she wished to see how he was to receive his aristocratic-looking caller.

Peter's face had flushed. He saw Beth Ashby, and the sight came so unexpectedly that his usual coolness was not proof against the shock. He rose and stood in awkward silence.

Beth entered the room.

"I wanted to see you," she announced.

There was no name spoken, but she looked at Peter, and her meaning was clear. He bowed.

"I shall be pleased—"

She made a quick gesture.

"Can I see you alone?" she demanded.

"Of course."

Peter looked at Merry, who promptly observed:

"I will retire to the next room."

"Thanks," answered Beth, somewhat coldly, "but I do not require that of you. If this—gentleman"—she hesitated over the word—"will step outside with me it will be quite enough."

"You are welcome here," answered Peter.

"I will not see you here," authoritatively declared Beth. "Will you come?"

"Yes."

The Plunger did not seem delighted with the chance. He knew he had no reason to be; Beth's manner, as well as the history of the past, settled that conclusively. She was still his enemy.

He put on his hat meekly and followed her out. She walked on without a pause.

"Where do we go?"

"To the street."

He had a vague notion that she had come in a carriage, but when the street door was reached that idea was proven incorrect. Then he was astonished. The streets of New York, at that hour, did not furnish a safe place for her to walk.

He stepped to her side when they touched the sidewalk, half expecting a rebuff, but none came. She broke the silence.

"You are surprised."

"I am," he admitted.

"I have a proposition to make to you."

"Well?"

"I wish you to leave America."

"Do I contaminate the air so much that you cannot breathe freely?" he quickly demanded.

"Do not be unjust to yourself. It is nothing so absurd as that. I make a proposition to you. Will you accept?"

"What if I do?"

"Then you will please me."

"I am happy in being able to please you."

even if I have to do so much!" he retorted, ungraciously.

"I will pay you well."

"Pay me?"

"Yes."

"Are you mad?"

"Decidedly not."

"Your words are those of a madwoman, I say. Pay me? Why, I would starve before I would take a dollar from you!" fiercely replied the Plunger.

"You are wrong to look upon this so."

"Possibly," remarked the sport, sarcastically, "it is the way with your swell lot to have a price for everything, but I am not of the gang. I thank Heaven I am not!"

It was a manly outbreak, and it moved Beth as nothing else could. If she had a failing it was not meanness or undue pride, and she saw she had unwillingly touched him in a sensitive spot.

"Do not misunderstand me," she replied. "I have no reason to suppose you are mercenary, but I infer that I have more of the goods of this life than you. I am willing to pay for—freedom!"

"Evidently you expect me to pounce upon you as we are situated. Have no fear on that head. I did not come to your country place to see you, and I would not have been there at all if I had known you were there. Until then I had no idea as to your identity. Now that I know, you will be just as free from me as you have been. I shall never come near you."

"But the idea of going abroad—"

"Is out of the question."

"I wish I could convince you."

"You cannot."

"I feel ill at ease—"

"Needlessly. You will never be troubled by me. I suspect," added Peter, slowly, "that you have some young man you admire. Good! Do with him as you will; I shall not be an obstacle."

"You are absurd. What would I have to do with a young man?"

"That is your affair. It is nothing to me."

Beth was not content. She made another effort to carry her point as to the matter of going abroad, but the sport was firm. He did not want to go, and he was determined not to go. She gave it up, at last, with a sigh.

They had been wandering on slowly, and she finally stopped short and as abruptly announced:

"I will leave you here."

"It is not a safe place. I will see you to one more likely to be free from annoyance to you."

"No."

"Then let me call a carriage."

"I can care for myself very well. Thank you, but I can accept nothing from you."

"As you will," he replied, with a sigh.

"One word before we part. It is about the girl at the house. What of her?"

"She is the same of whom I told you in the past."

"I well remember it, and it was because you had told me of her that I was enabled to find you. She is the girl who sings and dances on the stage?"

"Yes."

"You helped her into the life?"

"Yes."

"Help her out!"

"Why?"

"She is too pretty and intelligent—too good, I believe, for such a career. If there is a thoroughly demoralizing place in the world I think it must be the variety stage. It is no place for her. In her rank in life it may be thought something above the average. It is—in undesirable influences. Take her out, if you have any regard for her welfare."

"Why, she is doing finely financially."

"You are the same as of old; you see nothing of the better side of life. The girl has been your ward, if your account is correct. I enjoin you solemnly to take her out of this career of hers. Good-night!"

Beth started off abruptly. Peter called after her, but she did not heed him, and was soon receding at a distance.

"She may go through in safety," soliloquized the sport, "but her chances are not brilliant. I will see that no harm befalls her."

So this man who was thus rejected took

up the line of travel in the rear and, keeping well back where he would not be likely to be seen, followed until he saw Beth ascend the steps of the Elevated Road. Then he turned back.

"She wants to get rid of me, does she?" he murmured. "Wants me out of the country, eh? Well, there is a meaning in it. She said there was no man in the case, and she was not a liar in the old days, if she did hide things she better have told. But does she not speak untruthfully now? She is not the one to live without the love of some man. Has she nothing of the sort now? I believe she has."

Meditating on this point the Plunger walked on without much idea of the direction he was taking. Thus, he did not go back to the house of his young wards, but, when he finally aroused, he found himself near his own hotel.

He decided to enter.

He did so, and the clerk motioned to him.

"Two men waiting to see you, Pete," was the announcement.

"Humph!"

The sport spoke in a dissatisfied way. He was not in mood to see any one, but he accepted the situation as meekly as possible.

The clerk had motioned toward the reading-room, and Brand moved that way. Once within he was not kept waiting long. A man rose quickly and met him with extended hand.

"Glad to see you, Pete!" he declared.

"Yes."

It was an apathetic reply, and the hand which Pete allowed to rest for a moment only in the other's grasp was without returning pressure. The Plunger knew his companion and knew no good of him.

The latter's name was Andy Gillen. Brand's acquaintance with him was but slight, though Gillen always took pains to be agreeable to the Plunger. Andy was a man-about-town. Too lazy to work for his living, he gained it the easiest way he could. He hung about saloons and race-tracks; played cards for money and played the races; was a heeler in city politics, and, in brief, was the kind of a man whose room would have been very much better than his company in any walk of life.

"Let me introduce my friend, Mr. Liston," he added. "Liston, this is Mr. Brand, the sport."

Mr. Liston received a cool greeting, but said he was glad to meet Brand, and this appeared to be true.

If the full truth had been told, then, it would have been said that Liston was sailing under a false name, and if Darius Ashby had been present he would have recognized Luke Harkness.

The ex-slave of the Arabs had work on hand.

At Gillen's suggestion the three sat down, and the gambler came to the point without much delay.

"Pete," he announced, "we want your help in a business matter."

CHAPTER XIII.

A FIENDISH PROJECT.

BRAND did not evince any pleasure on hearing he was thus to be called upon. He did not aspire to do any business with Andy Gillen, or any of the crew that Andy might bring with him; so he simply nodded.

"I have told Mr. Liston," pursued Andy, "that there is nobody better posted on horse-flesh around New York than you are."

"That is an exaggeration, of course," bluntly replied Pete.

"Not so much. You follow horses very closely at Sheepshead, Gravesend, Morris Park and all the other resorts, and it's an open secret that you pick a winner in about every case."

"Wrong, again. The man who wins right along is not yet born. I win now and then. Any man might do the same who would keep informed as to the condition of the horses, and work the ring."

"There is more than that—"

"You did not mention your business, Mr. Gillen."

The quiet reminder shut off the gambler, and he came to the point.

"What I had to say was that you must know of horses of all kinds. There is

scarcely an owner, or trainer, or jockey, at any of the tracks whom you don't know, and you see horses that the ordinary sport knows nothing about."

"Granted! What then?"

"Mr. Liston wants to buy a horse."

"Is he going into racing?"

"No."

"What does he want?"

"A saddle-horse with the temper of a devil!"

It was Liston, otherwise Luke Harkness who made this explanation. He had been listening in silence, but with every appearance of great impatience with Gillen's dilatory course. As he broke in his eyes gleamed wildly, and his speech was rocket-like. Plunger Pete's gaze wandered to Luke, but his face was as unreadable as Luke's was excited.

"To be clear," added Andy, "he wants a horse to ride that will try his skill as a rider."

"Being an expert?"

"Yes."

"One might be had."

"Where?"

"Would an unbroken colt fill the bill?"

"No!" declared Luke. "What I want is a horse which is known to be notoriously vicious; one that will be ready to fight every inch of the road to mastery."

Plunger Pete smiled.

"You might try Demonio."

"What is he?"

"A horse owned by a racer who does business at Guttenburg, but one liable to kill the man who would associate with him."

Brighter grew Luke's eyes.

"Just what I want," he declared.

"Are you tired of living?"

"No."

"Then let Demonio alone!"

"I am not afraid of him."

"He is a man-killer."

"So much the better!"

"Do you want to be killed?" sharply demanded Pete.

"No."

"Then let Demonio alone."

"Is he a race-track runner?" asked Andy.

"He never run a race in his life. Those who have owned him would gladly have put him in, for he is a magnificent beast, but they dare not put such an animal on the course. You see, he is quiet enough at times, but there is no knowing when his evil temper will break out, and when it does he is a killer."

Luke Harkness's eyes glittered with emotion of some sort.

"Exactly what I desire!" he asserted.

"Tell me all about this rare equine king."

"Well, he was bred over somewhere in Jersey. His breeder was a slow-going farmer, who made no effort to handle him when he was young, and when he was purchased by a Guttenburg man he was simply a wild yearling, unhandled, but not known to be at all vicious."

"He soon made his reputation. He killed the first man who tried to fit him for work. He crippled the second. Then he was sold. Misfortune followed him, for he crippled a third man."

"Not to dwell on the subject I will say that half a dozen of the best professional horsemen of this region have tried to tame his wild spirit, but, though the attempt has cost four lives and any quantity of broken bones, he is still untamed."

"If he were of decent disposition he would be worth five hundred dollars to-day, and if his speed is what men estimate, it would bring five or ten times that as a running horse for use at Guttenburg, Sheepshead, or any other track."

"As it is, he is not worth a dollar, for he is useless in all ways," concluded Plunger Pete.

"Why have they not had some of the great horse-tamers of the country hold of him?" inquired Andy.

"One of the most famous did take hold of him, and Demonio behaved like a cherub. That's the fault with him; he will be amiable enough at times, but you might as soon trust the Evil One. Without the least warning or provocation, Demonio's temper will break forth, and he will bite, kick, trample on his handler—in short, go literally mad for the time."

"But he is mild enough at all other times?" eagerly asked Luke.

"Yes."

"And a fine-looking horse?"

"Magnificent."

"Where is he?"

"Over on a farm in Jersey."

"Will you take me there?"

"If you want to be killed—yes."

"When?"

"As soon as you please."

"To-morrow morning, then. Mr. Brand, I thank you for putting me onto this chance. I have seen wild horses before, and I feel able to cope with them. This animal will just suit me—his vile temper will be a good quality with me, rather than a bad one. He's just what I desire, you see."

"Some men," remarked Brand, dryly, "might be rash enough to think they would enjoy a bout with the Evil One himself, but I fancy that dark ruler would change one's mind on trial. So of Demonio. Buy him, if you wish, but remember you are duly warned."

"Yes. Where can we see the animal?"

Plunger Pete gave the address, and then Harkness and Gillen went their way. Peter sat looking meditatively into space,

"An odd freak!" he murmured. "I am tempted to believe there is a deep purpose back of all this. If so, what can it be?"

He would have wondered less could he have followed Luke Harkness with his gaze. The ex slave of the Arabs soon parted with Andy, and then went to a private room. This done he took out a paper and, turning readily to a certain place, read this advertisement:

"WANTED—A spirited horse suitable for saddle-riding. Courage, strong will and speed essential qualities. For a satisfactory animal a good price will be paid. Address,

"D. C. A., Box 907."

Luke laughed.

"Reads so innocent that one would never suspect that the hand of Darius Ashby penned the lines, unless he was in the secret. Lucky that Gillen was aware of Ashby's desire."

The ex-slave dropped the paper and meditated. Finally a smile of an unpleasant nature curved his lips.

"Darius," he commented, "I think that Demonio will just about suit you. He has ample courage and spirit. You are crazy on the subject of fine horses. It is your pet passion to ride them, and you have a supply of mettlesome steeds. You delight in racing them across the country, in a counterfeit fox-hunt, or otherwise. Demonio is full of 'spirit.' You will try to ride him, and—I devoutly pray that the fiendish brute will kill you!"

The words were hissed with ferocious power, and Luke's eyes glittered like a fiend's. Presently he grew calmer and added:

"It is a year and a half before the provisions of old Guerdon Lorrester's will end. If I marry Catholine before that time the fortune will come to us—to her and to me. What's to hinder me from marrying her if Darius Ashby dies before then?—dies, killed by Demonio, the horse demon."

The plot became clear, and the ex-slave was seen in his true light.

"I would myself kill you, Darius," he asserted, "but the breath of suspicion must never touch me. I look to Demonio to do the work."

It was late when Luke retired. Next to seeing Catholine he found it the greatest of pleasures to think of his plot; to dwell upon the probability that Darius would fall victim to the ferocity of the untamable horse.

The Lorrester money was likely to do untold harm ere the drama was acted to an end.

Often on the desert Luke had slept poorly, brokenly, miserably, with the bonds of his captors upon him, but never had he passed a night more restless than when he dreamed of the deed of murder he had in mind then.

CHAPTER XIV.

DEMONIO—RED ROYAL.

THE next day Luke and Andy drove up to a house in a small New Jersey town. The house stood back from any main road, and was a desolate-looking place, withal.

It was the property of a man who had deserted it for more congenial scenes in the city of New York, and its recent history was various and varied.

At that time there were several horses in the little stable. One was a broken-down racer that was being "fixed" up in the hope that, even if he died the hour after, he could be made to run one good race and thus net his owners a snug sum. All the horses were there for some purpose that smacked of trickery.

A colored man came to meet the new arrivals, and Andy asked for a certain "Spud Meenan." Mr. Meenan came, and Andy produced a letter which found the way to Meenan's good graces.

"Yes," he observed, "you can see Demonio if you want to, but you may get your brains kicked out by going into the stable."

"Isn't he secure?"

"You can bet he is as much so as we can make him, but he is on an ugly fit now, and we never know what he will do when in such a mood. Yes, I reckon he is secure, and you can safely come in, no doubt. But you will see him in a temper—the demon!"

"I thought he was usually quiet," remarked Luke.

"So he is, and so he was yesterday, but the crazy fit is on, now. Come and see."

Meenan led the way to a window that overlooked the stable, and they obeyed his direction to look in. They saw a dozen stalls, all filled with horses, and all quiet. Off at one corner was a solitary stall, and in this could be seen another horse. More they could not distinguish, for the rear of the stall was as high-boarded as the sides, and the occupant was hemmed in.

"That's the only way to keep him," explained Meenan. "He would break out if we didn't make him fast. Come in!"

They went. Immediately a wild equine scream sounded from the closed stall, and a pair of feet struck its side with a resounding thump.

"Go it, you demon!" muttered Meenan. "You are helpless."

Andy showed reluctance to go nearer to the dangerous brute, but Harkness was not timid. Together with Meenan he mounted a box so as to get a look into the stall.

Demonio was there.

For a time Luke could tell but little about him, for the animal began to leap around madly, kicking and screaming, and his wide-open mouth suggested what would occur if he could get hold of his neighbors.

He lurched wildly at them, and even Luke was inclined to shrink away from the glittering, flaming eyes and lashing hoofs.

"Why, the beast is actually crazy," Harkness declared.

"He is, when he's in his fit."

"Can it be he ever gets quiet?"

"He does."

"It is hard to believe."

"In a day or two all this will pass away gradually, and he will be peaceable enough."

"Does the fit come on gradually?"

"Not as a rule. He usually breaks out all of a sudden, and there is the danger. He will kill a man before he can be discovered as being in a crazy mood. We should not handle him at all, but he does not have the spells more than once in a week, so we can ride him now and then. A superb saddle-horse!"

Luke was silent, filled with the task of looking Demonio over.

He was a horse of rare beauty. He was of unusual size and strength, and his proportions were well-nigh perfect. His color was a striking blood bay, and the hair was short and glossy.

Easily could Harkness believe that he would be very valuable if he was not of such fiendish temper.

"A magnificent brute," he admitted; and then made a quick retreat from the box as Demonio tried to strike them with his forward feet.

"A devil, I should say," amended Andy.

"Right," Meenan agreed.

"I understand he is for sale," continued Luke.

"He always is."

"Suppose I send a purchaser here, will you keep still as to his bad points?"

"The owner is the man to sell him. I neither praise nor decry him."

"You could name the time when he was most likely to be in a mood so his ugliness would not be detected?"

"Yes."

"I'll send a man around."

"Has he ordered his coffin?"

Luke smiled a most disagreeable smile.

"That is his lookout."

"So it is, but if he's a friend of yours you may as well see your tailor and have a suit ready to wear to his funeral. If the man buys Demonio without knowing what he is, Demonio will kill him as sure as you live!"

"That is his lookout," placidly repeated Harkness.

A wild scream from the closed stall, and then the sound of rattling boards as Demonio sent his hoofs against the inclosure.

"A perfect fiend!" exclaimed Andy Gillen, with a shiver. "It is rank suicide to think of handling him. He's as fine-looking a horse as I ever saw, but it is no exaggeration to say that he is a fiend."

Luke Harkness smiled. He wanted Demonio to be as dangerous as he could, and it pleased him to have a good judge of horse-flesh put the seal of his verdict on the brute's total depravity.

"Your owner," pursued Luke, presently, addressing Meenan, "will see you in a few days, and give you further directions. He will tell you what to do with the animal, and when he is fit to sell the prospective buyer will be around. Don't report him ready until you are sure."

"Never fear; I'll have Demonio in an angelic mood when the buyer comes. A child could then ride him—if he did not suddenly take his crazy fit."

Three days later there were other visitors at the stable, and Meenan was called out as before to see the strangers. One was a fine-looking man who announced:

"I have come to look at a horse named Red Royal. You are boarding him, are you not?"

"Yes," answered Meenan; "Red Royal is here."

"Could I see him?"

"Certainly. Do you come from New York?" carelessly added Meenan.

"Yes. My name is Darius Ashby."

"All right, sir."

Meenan did not tell the visitor that he had heard the name before, but he knew all that was necessary now that the explanation was made. He led the way to the stable.

"That is Red Royal."

Mr. Ashby looked. Somewhat apart from the other stalls he saw one in which stood a handsome bay horse. He was a fine-appearing beast as he stood there, and, when he turned his head to look at the men, the stranger saw a head full of intelligence.

He walked in beside Red Royal. The latter did not welcome him with a whinny, as some horses would, nor put out his nose to search for a toothsome morsel, but his manner was not hostile. Slightly the shapely ears were thrown back on the neck—that was the only sign of irritation.

Darius looked him over in the stall, and then Meenan led Red Royal out into the floor. In doing this the stable-keeper silently voiced a prayer that the brute would not tread him under his feet, but Red Royal was amiable.

Darius's eyes glittered. He had owned many horses in his day, but had never possessed one that pleased him in looks as this one did. Besides the beauty of the animal he noted his magnificent strength, his well-rounded chest, his perfect limbs, and the many other things so dear to the heart of the lover of fine horses.

Then there was the intelligent eyes and general air of impetuosity.

"Full of spirit, isn't he?" Darius asked.

Meenan closed his left eye secretly.

"He is!" he admitted.

"I do not like a sleepy horse."

"Red Royal is not sleepy, sir."

"A good saddle-horse should be playful."

"Red Royal has a good many little tricks that way."

"Is he fairly kind?"

"I have not had him long, but you can see how mild he acts."

"I would like to ride him."

"You can, sir. I would first ride him, but I am not so nimble, as I was, and I would rather not mount."

"That's all right."

Red Royal was saddled, and Darius mounted.

He rode around the premises for some time. The animal was playful as could be wished, going with a light and dancing step, but nothing told of ill temper, and Darius was well impressed. When he had satisfied himself he dismounted.

"He pleases me well!" he declared, "and I will see the owner again. I want a saddle-horse for my own use, and Red Royal seems just right. If I can come to terms I expect to make a new record with him."

CHAPTER XV.

THE MAN ON THE TRAIL.

PLUNGER PETE was in Central Park. He had been wandering idly about until he was stopped by sight of a man whose face was familiar to him.

"Detective Swanden!" he murmured.

He had been around the country place of the Ashbys enough to know the local detective by sight, and to know that he was, or had been, engaged in the case arising from the discovery of the death of Hiram Inkrod.

"I will speak to him," he added, "and see if he has made any advance in the matter."

He was about to move forward when he saw Swanden start and look fixedly in a certain direction. Peter's own gaze strayed the same way.

"Ashby's wife!" he muttered.

It was Catholine Ashby, riding alone with the exception of the servant on the box.

She neared Swanden, and he seemed to take a sudden resolution and act upon it. He stepped partially into the carriage way, and then made a motion to her. She looked, recognized him, gave the word to the driver, and the vehicle stopped.

"Excuse me," said the detective, the words floating to Peter's hearing easily, "but can I speak a word with you?"

"Certainly," replied Catholine.

"Will you dismount?"

"Is it necessary?"

"What I have to say is private."

"Then enter the carriage and go to my home."

"Excuse me, but that I do not wish to do. We can easily speak here, if you will oblige me."

Plainly, Catholine did not wish to oblige him in any such way, but she had reasons for not desiring to anger or annoy him. The death of the horse-dealer on the Ashby premises had worried her a good deal, with its notoriety, and she was anxious to avoid anything like unnecessary publicity.

Swanden, in his official capacity, was a man she wanted to keep in good humor.

"Very well," she decided.

She alighted, and, leaving the carriage and coachman by the side of the driver, went with Swanden to the adjacent territory. The detective saw a bench and motioned her to it, but she did not sit. Neither of them noticed a person partially concealed by the bushes near them.

The person was Plunger Pete.

At the first he saw that he would be able to hear what was said, but he was not a man of fine sense of honor, and, though he did not see any good reason why he should desire to overhear them, he made no effort to avoid doing so. Thus, their words floated to his ears at all times.

"I am ready," announced Catholine.

"You are still in New York?" asked Swanden.

"Certainly."

"People at your country home wonder at your retreat."

"There is nothing to wonder about. We came home but a little earlier than usual, and would never think of wintering there. The country is pleasant in summer, but quite another thing when the weather becomes cold."

"Well, they think the tragedy should have kept you there."

"Kept us?" echoed Catholine. "Why, it was the reason why we left. It put an end to our gayety, and then there was nothing to keep us. As you are aware, Mr. Ashby goes up now and then, to see the horses he still has there, but why should we remain when all our guests are gone?"

"The neighbors are less charitable."

"Charitable?"

"Yes."

"Why should they be charitable?"

"They are talking."

"About us?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"They have their theory as to how Hiram Inkrod was killed."

"Indeed! May I ask what it is?"

"Before he came to the house," replied Swanden, "he stopped at the village hotel. You remember that?"

"I have heard so," amended Catholine.

"Some weeks before Mr. Ashby had sold him a horse—a saddle animal commonly known as Comet."

"Not sold. Mr. Ashby had it on trial, but returned it as the horse was not sound."

"I accept your correction," returned the detective. "As you are aware, there was a quarrel over the animal—I need not recite it. To come to the point, Inkrod said at the hotel that he was on his way to see Ashby and demand satisfaction. More than that, he said that if the satisfaction was not forthcoming, he would whip Ashby within an inch of his life!"

"He did not live to do it."

Catholine was not a hard-hearted woman, but there was a grain of satisfaction in her comment. Swanden kept grimly to his subject.

"He went to your house with the avowed intention of having a quarrel, you see."

"Well?"

"Now, people are asking, Did he see Ashby and have the quarrel?"

"He did not!" declared Catholine.

"Are you sure?"

"Yes; Mr. Ashby has said so."

Even Plunger Pete smiled at the logic of the speaker, and the detective bowed somewhat mockingly, it would seem.

"Did he not leave the house immediately after another guest of yours went out?"

Catholine thought of Luke Harkness.

"Yes."

"It was about at that time Inkrod was supposed to arrive at the Ashby residence."

Catholine started. Before that she had not suspected that there was any need of her using care, but she was now on the alert at once. She began to be suspicious of this questioning.

"Mr. Inkrod was not at the house," she declared.

"People say he may have met Ashby in the grounds," insinuated Mr. Swanden, quietly.

"He did not."

"And they also ask, who but Ashby had a motive for doing him harm?"

"Sir? Mr. Ashby would not harm him!" cried Catholine, excitedly.

"Who else should?"

"That I do not know."

"You say he did leave the house immediately after your guest went?"

"I don't know—"

"You said he did!"

Catholine confronted the detective hostilely. She saw that she had been betrayed into a rash statement, and she suspected it was just why he had stopped her. She was all alert to defend the man she loved, and Swanden looked hateful in her sight then. She rallied.

"I do not know such to be a fact, sir. Even if it is, what of it?"

"Nothing, except that it is suggestive when we remember that Inkrod went there with the avowed intention of making trouble. In brief, people in that section do not hesitate to say that it was Ashby who did Inkrod to his death!"

Mr. Swanden was not the most skillful detective in the world, or he would not have proceeded as he did, but he had followed his clue until it became the leading idea in his mind to get proof that Ashby had left the house, as report said he did, that night of tragedy; and when he had the proof he was so elated that he went ahead impetuously.

He had said more than a sensible man would, and the whole truth was forced upon Catholine.

It was a terrible blow. No guilt was yet proved, but it unnerved her to hear that her husband was suspected. She had grown very pale, and her face was trembling as she exclaimed:

"It is false—infamously false!"

"Can this be proved?" dryly returned Swanden.

"Do you accuse—do you dare accuse my husband?"

"I accuse no one, madam."

"But your words—"

"The people ask, who but Ashby had cause to harm Inkrod?"

"Infamous, infamous!"

"Can you prove his innocence?"

"Who dares accuse him? Prove his innocence? Nobody who knows him would think of doubting him."

"Somebody killed Inkrod."

Catholine paused and tried to be calm. She was terribly upset by this talk. What was she to do? How could she help Darius? What could she say in his behalf? She tried to think of something, and did the best thing she could have done. It came to her that she had been betrayed into one rash admission, and she resolved not to make another mistake. She took her cue and followed it.

"Have you stopped me to talk of this, Mr. Swanden?" she inquired.

"Yes."

"Then we have said enough. Your words are too wild to be considered, and I decline to continue the conversation."

She made a movement to go, but the detective insinuatingly added:

"I had thought you might be willing to help Ashby, madam?"

"How can I?"

"If we talk this over we may clear away the suspicion."

"To me, there is none, sir."

"Somebody killed Inkrod."

"A thousand men may have been killed, sir, but Darius Ashby had no hand in it. You wrong him greatly by the mere mention of the fact—you wrong him and I know it. Knowing it, I decline to discuss the point further."

This time Catholine was more in earnest about going, and though he called to her she did not heed him. She gained the carriage and was driven away homeward.

Swanden stood looking after her.

"Indignant as a tragedy queen!" he muttered. "Indignant, and all bound up in Ashby. Well, that's woman-like. Let one of them have a man in her heart and a battering-ram can't make impression against her fancy for him. I should have known it; I have not got on as I had hoped."

Confronted with this fact the detective walked off, and Peter Brand was left to occupy the ground alone. He had not been seen, but he had heard all. He seemed a good deal moved.

"So Ashby is suspected!" he murmured.

"So, so! Suspected of murder, and he is Beth's brother!"

A period of silence, and then his face flushed.

"By my life!" he cried, "there is hope for me. I will turn detective; I will take up this case; I will clear Ashby if such a thing is possible. Then Beth may not hate me so bitterly."

CHAPTER XVI.

THE DETECTIVE IS PERPLEXED.

PLUNGER PETE was not a man who often became excited, but he had enough now to stir him out of his usual mood. His calm face showed the result of it all, and he was like another man.

"Yes," he added. "I'll turn detective. It's a business I know nothing about, but I shall have something to sharpen my wits. I shall be working for Beth. Can I see her and tell her so?"

He walked along the path in a deeply meditative mood.

"If I should go to her she would not hear me, and the only way is to lure her to where Merry lives. Ay, the girl shall be my aid!"

The sudden thought just suited him, and he hastened to get out of the park and to the house where Merry and Silky Shaw boarded. It was not a long journey; and he brought up there in due time.

Silky proved to be out, but Merry met him at the door. The Race-Track Detective was so pleased to see her that he yielded to an impulse and advanced with open arms.

"Merry, my treasure, how are you?" he cried. "Give me a kiss and let us have a talk—Eh?"

Merry had retreated from the offered

salute. Her face had flushed too, but Peter was merely surprised.

"Why, ain't you willing?" he asked.

"I think you had better not," she answered, nervously.

"Bless me! you never refused before!"

"When have you asked me before?"

"True, true! Now I think of it, I have not in a long while. But let us turn over a new leaf and not be so cold—"

Again he put out his arms; again she retreated.

"I am no longer a child," she reminded.

"That's right, by Jove! I had not thought of it before, but you really are a woman, Merry. But that's all the better. You used to be ready to show affection for me—"

"That was two years or more ago."

"And I have not asked for a kiss since?"

"No."

"I'll be hanged if I haven't been stupid. But I'll make amends if you will let me—"

"No, no, Mr. Brand!"

"Eh? What? *Mister* Brand?"

"Peter, then."

"I seem to have lost my reckoning, somehow," delared Pete, bewildered. "You won't give me a kiss, and now I am 'Mr. Brand' and 'Peter,' instead of Pete, as I was once."

"Yes; when I was Merry, the child. Now, I am Merry, the woman."

"And you've gone back on me."

"No, no; I have not; but things are changed."

"So they are, by thunder! Changed, changed!"

Plunger Pete sat down soberly. When he had rescued Merry from the depths of poverty he had often kissed her as any one would a bright child, but he saw her often, and the habit dwindled without his missing anything or realizing that anything was omitted. He had seen her often; he had forgotten what he had. Now, it was his no longer.

Mentally he admitted her right to refuse if she would, but he did not feel reconciled to it. Why had she refused? He looked at her more closely. Her eyes were downcast, and her cheeks flushed. He wondered what that meant. Knowing he was not keen of perception in matters where woman was concerned he tried to learn what it meant.

"Are you angry, Merry?" he inquired.

"No."

"What is it, then?"

"I don't understand why you act so queer—"

"There is nothing *queer* about it. Now, don't let us make much of nothing, I hope you have been well since I saw you?"

"Quite well, and I hope you have been."

Peter said he had, and then attempted to return to the previous subject, but was baffled by her in a quiet way, and the conversation turned into another channel.

Merry was as friendly as he could hope, and he gradually forgot the cloud of the last few minutes. He had forgotten something else, too, but it occurred to him again later, and he acted with haste.

"Merry," he exclaimed, "I want you to do something for me."

"What is it?" she inquired.

"You remember the young lady who was here?"

There was a quick change of expression on Merry's face, and one which did not indicate pleasure.

"Yes."

"I want you to get her here again. I want to see her."

"Do you?" asked the girl, in a low voice.

"Yes. Now, don't you inquire why?"

"I do not care why!" exclaimed Merry.

Peter was filled with momentary wonder. He realized that the emphasis of her tone meant something out of the ordinary run of events, but he did not know what. He did not think she was amiable, however. There was something akin to viciousness in her assertion that she did not care.

Peter tried to get into line again.

"Will you write to her," he pursued, "and tell her you want to see her?"

"But it is you who want to see her!"

"Yes, but she would not come if I sent word."

"What am I to say if she comes?"

"I'll be the one to meet her."

"Then she is to come thinking I want to see her when, really, she will meet you?"

"Yes, yes; wasn't I clear enough?"

"Mr. Brand," seriously replied Merry, "do you realize what you ask?"

"Eh?"

"Would it be honorable?"

"She won't come otherwise."

"Would you deceive her thus?"

"It's the only way."

"Then she will not come," firmly declared Merry. "I should be glad to help you, but what you ask is impossible. It would be far from honorable to call her here by any such trick—it would be very *dishonorable*. Surely, you would not trick a woman thus."

The detective had another problem to confront. The remark has been made before in these pages that he was not a noble character. He was not. Born and reared in a low station in life he had never risen any further above it than to wear good clothes, a rise which did not affect his moral nature. In his pursuit of bread and butter he had never been a breaker of State laws, but he had infringed on those of the Golden Rule more than once.

Trickery was a part of the stock in trade of those with whom he dealt; it was so with him, in a measure.

Merry's reproof confused him.

"Don't you approve of it?" he finally inquired.

"No."

"Seems mean to you, does it?"

"Yes."

"Then it might to her."

"It surely would."

"Then I won't do it. I don't want to hurt or offend her—not for the world!"

Another peculiar look came to Merry's face.

"I guess it *would* be mean," added Peter, after a pause. "It would be a trick to gain an end. I won't do it, but I want to see her. I can manage it somehow, maybe. She mustn't be hurt. She's a fine girl, Merry."

"Does she think the same of you?"

The retort came so quickly that Peter must have seen that no good will was in it had he not been so bound up in the subject.

"I'm sorry to say she don't," he answered, in his lumbering way. "She is down on me. Merry, I don't deserve all this, but she fairly hates me, and I've always tried to do well by her. I like her, Merry!"

Blind Peter! The color in Merry's cheeks increased, but he was unconscious of it all. A whole drama was before him, and he saw no part of it. He saw only Beth, because his mind was so attuned that he could discern her as well as if she were present.

"She is queer," he pursued. "Now, it may be a mean thing to say, but I am sure there would be no objection to me if I was of her swell set. She sees fit to regard my calling in life as dishonorable. Just because I play the races! Why, thousands of other men do the same. She says it's gambling. Her set gamble, too, and with cards—that's out-and-out gambling—but she never sets down on them. I see nothing wrong in betting that Banquet at one, twenty-two will beat Loantaka at one, fifteen, and Gloaming at one, twelve, and the field at other odds. But *she* does!"

Merry was silent.

"But of course you don't care for this," abruptly added Peter. "You are too young to understand."

Merry sighed softly.

"If you say it's wrong to lure her here it isn't going to be done," decided the Plunger. "I wouldn't be mean to that girl for a million, if she does hate me."

His companion looked at the floor and said nothing. Possibly it was not pleasant for her to hear the praises of Beth Ashby.

"Well, Merry, that's all," added Peter. "I'll leave you now."

CHAPTER XVII.

THE BLACKMAILER'S LUCK.

THE race-track detective rose, and Merry did not oppose his decision to go. He made an effort then to show that he was not all bound up in his own affairs, and added:

"Is business good, Midget?"

"It's good enough," replied Merry, indifferently.

"I'm glad to hear that. Plenty of engagements, eh?"

"Yes."

"You're coming on famously. Why, you may get to be a Patti, yet!"

"I don't want to be!" exclaimed the girl.

"Wouldn't like the notoriety, would you?"

"No."

"Well, you need not care for such glory as long as you have engagements enough in your line."

"I don't care whether I have them or not!" flashed Merry.

"What?" cried Pete, astonished.

"I have enough," added the singer, more cautiously.

"Oh! I see. Well, that is so. You are so placed that you can feel independent. I am glad of it, too; glad of it. It is a fine thing to have the cash coming in so, and you have worked hard enough to deserve it. I glory in your success, Merry, and hope you will go on to fresh triumphs all the while. You have my best wishes. Well, I'll be off now, but I'll see you again."

"Silky will be pleased to have you call."

"I'll call and tell him where to put his money on the races," continued Peter, smiling. "Say to him that he can safely bet on Dr. Hasbrouck in any short race, for as a 'sprinter' the horse is in class A. Henry of Navarre is in it to-morrow, and is a good thing. A right good horse. Now I'm off."

Shaking Merry's hand the sport went out. When he had gained the sidewalk his mind wandered from the racers of Sheepshead to other matters.

"What's the matter with Merry?" he wondered. "She don't seem like herself any more. She gave me a very limp hand at parting, and, now I think of it, when I said I would call again she remarked that Silky Shaw would be glad to see me. Not a word for herself. Won't *she* be glad? It looks as if she won't."

For awhile he meditated on this fact, and then sighed and added:

"They all go back on me. Possibly I don't deserve any better, but it's a bit hard!"

Presently his mind wandered to Beth.

"What can I do to show her that I am her friend?" he thought. "She will not be convinced by anything but strict business, so how can I convince her? Ah! I had forgotten the Inkrod murder. Yes, yes; I'll turn detective and clear Ashby from suspicion. That will please her."

The day was not yet spent, and Peter conceived an idea and acted upon it. He went to the Grand Central, took a train and was soon moving northward. In due time he alighted at the station nearest to the country residence of the Ashbys, and then walked over to the grounds.

"As I understand it they have all come back to New York," he murmured, "but I want to look the land over a bit. If Ashby did not kill Inkrod, who did? Who could have done it?"

The detective shook his head.

"Who else had a motive?"

He began to see that he had not undertaken an easy task, and the work looked gigantic to a novice, but he did not weaken.

"It's for Beth, and I'll do it!"

There was the sound of horse's feet. He stepped into the bushes without knowing why he did so. Along the road came a rider with his horses at a gallop.

"It is Ashby. Ah! that's a fine horse he rides."

Past the ambush went the rider. As he did so he exclaimed to his equine companion:

"Take it easy, Red Royal! There is no haste."

He went on.

"A great horse," continued Peter. "Handsome, strong and spirited. So his name is Red Royal? Fanciful enough for one of the swells, surely. Ashby is rich, and he can afford to ride Red Royal."

It was unlucky that the Plunger, though he had heard much of the horse Demonio in the past, had never seen the animal. If he had he might at that juncture have warned Darius and prevented another tragedy. But the warning came not, and the tragedy was on its way.

Continuing, Pete entered the Ashby

grounds. A little investigation showed him that the place was nearly deserted. Darius and one servant were to be seen at the stable door, but this was the only sign of life.

Believing such a course safe the Plunger wandered about the inclosure. There Inkrod had fallen. His blood was not avenged. The man who had done him to his death was still walking the streets in perfect immunity, no matter whether it was Ashby or somebody else. It was no small matter for a man to give up his life thus. Inkrod had been low and disreputable, but he had been a human being. His death should by right be avenged—for Beth's sake! This was the course of Pete's reasoning—it really was Beth he thought of, though he argued from a general point of view.

The Plunger had to use due care so as not to show himself to the owner of the grounds, and his range of action was so confined that he finally sat down and relapsed into inaction.

Presently footsteps sounded on the walk. Somebody advanced, and Pete pressed closer to the bushes. Darius came into view.

The latter might be a man under suspicion, and, since the citizen had called and given him the warning, he was well aware that he was, but he bore it well. He was looking to his grounds now, and he had as much careful solicitude for each flower and shrub as if he was free from all worry.

Suddenly he was accosted. A man stepped out of cover and stood in his path.

No pleasant-looking man was he. He had a red face, flashy clothes, a swagger, and that unmistakable air which tells of the frequenter of saloons, sporting places and fast scenes in a large city.

He bowed to Darius.

"Good-afternoon," he spoke.

Ashby looked with unconcealed dissatisfaction. He bowed; he did no more.

"You've got a fine place here, boss."

"Thank you," replied Darius, stiffly.

"You must enjoy it."

"Think so?"

"Yes."

Darius said nothing. Then an ugly gleam came into the flashy man's eyes. He was not so dull of comprehension that he failed to understand that his room was considered better than his company.

"You wouldn't like to lose it!" abruptly added the stranger.

"I shall not lose it."

"Sure?"

"Yes."

"Not if you go to Sing Sing?"

Darius turned more fully upon the caller.

"What nonsense are you talking?" he demanded. "I am not aware that I invited you here, and if you have no business I would advise you to move on."

The stranger's face flushed with anger.

"It costs money to move *me* on!" he declared.

"Indeed!"

"Yes, sir. I ain't no country jay, but I'm right from the Bowery, I be. My name is Bat Feegan. You may have heard of me?"

"I have not, and I don't care to—"

"Do ye know why I'm here?"

"No, and I don't care."

"You bet yer life yer do!" asserted Mr. Feegan, belligerently, and with a warning shake of his finger. "Don't you get gay, now, or the whole world will soon know who killed Hiram Inkrod!"

"Possibly *you* know, already," insinuated Darius.

"Bet yer bimetal I do!" retorted Bat. "That's why I am here. Ye see, I am dead onter yer game, boss, an' I come here ter say that if you want this thing kept still et can be done easy. See?"

"I see that, if you don't leave here, you and I will have trouble. Do you notice the road over yonder?"

"I do, but I ain't goin' that way. Cully, I happen ter be aware that it was *you* who killed Inkrod, an' that's why I am here. I'm the only duck that is on ter the fact, an' we can settle et. In plain words, ef you pay fer it I'll hold my hush."

Darius was calm. Neither anger nor fear seemed to move him."

"Do I understand that you accuse me of killing Inkrod?" he inquired.

"Yes."

"Then you lie, sir!"

"Oh! come off de perch! I'm dead on. Fact is, I was around here that night, an' I seen you do et, boss. I was in luck, that night, an' now I am workin' the lead. Pay up an' I'll shut up."

"So you aspire to blackmail me?"

"I want the stuff."

"You will not get a dollar!"

"Sure?"

"Yes."

"Then it'll be because my luck has gone back on me, an' that ain't the case. The luck holds good, an' you'll fork over or get blowed on. Will you pay fer safety?"

CHAPTER XVIII.

STRUCK DOWN.

BAT FEEGAN slipped his thumbs carelessly into his vest pockets and waited for Ashby's decision with all the nonchalance in the world. He felt able to carry his point, and could afford to let the victim squirm a little on the hook before turning the reel.

Evidently he had found a worthy adversary, for Darius was at his calmest then. He did not waver in the least as he eyed the blackmailer.

"Do you make a business of this sort of thing?" he asked, sarcastically.

"That's my affair," replied Bat, in a surly tone.

"Keep your secret. You and I can soon adjust our business. If you think you can get one dollar from me you are a fool. You have tackled the wrong man. Get off my grounds!"

"Not much!"

"Then I'll throw you off!"

Darius advanced a step, and as Feegan noticed his generous display of muscle he became more prudent.

"Say, I *seen* you do Inkrod up!" he persisted.

"Indeed?"

"I was here, an' I heerd the quarrel, an' see you shoot."

"Some men might infer from your talk that it was *you* who killed the horse-dealer, but I can see that you are too big a coward to show your head if you were guilty. You are simply a parasite on the face of Nature who thinks he can do something in the true coward's line—and that means as a blackmailer. Wrong! Not a cent will I give you."

"Now don't get gay—"

"You speak with utter falsehood when you say you saw me shoot Inkrod, or saw me with him. I was not with him. You have simply heard and swallowed some of the rumors now in circulation, and you believed you saw a good chance to get money by blackmail. You have met the wrong man!"

"But—"

"Leave my grounds!"

"I will, when I get ready. See?"

Feegan's Bowery blood began to rise. He was angry to see his plot for raising cash likely to fail, and when Darius spoke so contemptuously and commandingly it stirred Bat up amazingly.

"You will go now!"

With this declaration Darius advanced on the blackmailer. A personal encounter was at hand, and Plunger Pete expected something desperate. Looking upon Feegan as the certain winner he was ready to interfere in Darius's behalf.

Feegan stood firm, very willing to fight, his fists ready to do great execution.

Closer came Ashby, and Bat struck at him. The blow fell short, and there was a change in the situation. Somehow—Bat did not exactly see how—Darius had him by the collar and was marching him off the lawn as if he was a boy caught robbing an apple-tree.

The blackmailer grew wild with rage.

He squirmed to free himself, but all in vain. Darius had the grip of a blacksmith, and Bat was constantly forced away. He had one resort left—that of the coward and ruffian.

He drew a knife, and tried with a quick blow to strike Darius before the latter could catch sight of the weapon.

He failed. Quicker of eye than he was credited with being, the master of the place evaded the blow with ease and skill. Then something unpleasant happened to Feegan.

He fell to the ground—dropped by a blow from Darius's fist which made a sound audible far around—felled like a log.

"Ha!" muttered Plunger Pete, "that was a beauty if I ever saw one!"

Bat Feegan did not seem to think so. He rolled around on the ground in a ridiculous way, as if not able to stop his movements at all, but there was some excuse for it. He felt as if his head had jumped off from his shoulders, and that the whole earth was spinning like a top.

Ashby waited for him to recover.

With a series of deep sighs and groans Feegan finally sat up. He had a bruise under one eye, and his face appeared to have grown in length amazingly. He rubbed that ugly face and looked at Darius wonderingly. Anon, his wits began to work.

"You did it!—you!" he exclaimed, huskily.

"I suspect I did," coolly agreed Ashby.

"You hit me—me!"

"You ought to know!"

"That was a coward trick!"

Darius picked up the fallen knife.

"What of this?" he quietly inquired.

"You was hustlin' me away. You took an unfair advantage of me in all ways."

"Your logic is beautiful, but it does not alter the facts. Possibly you are ready to leave me now?"

Feegan eyed the speaker in silence for awhile, and then scrambled to his feet.

"Yes, I'll go," he agreed. "I'll go," he added, moving off, "but I kin tell you one thing—you ain't seen the last o' me. You got mighty gay, an' you think et was funny, but it'll prove anything else. You'll hear from me ag'in—Bat Feegan, Bowery, New York."

Now that he was out of Darius's reach the blackmailer grew courageous again. He shook his fist at the object of his hatred and added:

"I'll be square, I will; I'll down ye afore we are much older. It was a cowardly blow, an' I'll do you up—"

He stopped short. Darius was not more reconciled to such language than before, and he had made movement toward the boaster. It was enough. Bat Feegan, bad man from the Bowery, turned and hastened toward the road.

He did not pause even when he reached it, but hurried toward the station. Darius was alone—alone, because an idea had come to Plunger Pete and he was on the trail of the blackmailer.

"I want to know more of him," thought the Plunger. "If he knows so much about the matter, may it not be that he knows who did kill the horse-dealer?"

With this thought in mind Peter kept on Feegan's trail without letting the fellow suspect his intentions. Feegan took the first train for New York, and one of the other passengers was Plunger Pete.

Arrived at the Grand Central the journey was resumed, and, just as night was falling, Bat reached a saloon in the lower part of the city. He entered, and Pete still followed.

Several men were in the place, and one of them moved quickly at sight of Feegan. The latter joined him, while Pete dropped into a chair in a retired spot and looked with some wonder. The person who was thus greeting Bat was no stranger; it was Andy Gillen, the low class sport.

"Andy in with *him*!" breathed Pete. "I wouldn't have thought it, and yet, why not? Andy is a disreputable fellow, and given to all kinds of mean ways of getting a living."

Evidently, Andy and Feegan were in harmony on this occasion, if not in other ways.

They began to talk rapidly.

Pete could almost trace the course of the blackmailer's story. He told it swiftly, with many a gesture and scowl, and when he reached the point where he exhibited the bruise on his face he looked positively fiendish.

"If he ever gets a chance at Ashby it will go hard with the man who struck that blow," thought the Plunger.

Andy appeared to be as much disappointed as his companion. He showed it in all ways, and the watcher would have been blind had he not understood that Andy was as much in the plot as Bat.

"But how did he get on to it?" wondered

Peter. "I never thought to find him in the case. Well, he's in, and I reckon I shall do well to look to him. If this precious pair don't know who killed Inkrod, then my detective lore is under a cloud."

It might be under a cloud as far as his surmise went, but he had gained one point by discovering the source of the blackmailing scheme, for that Gillen was at the bottom of it he did not doubt. The work was more like him than any such person as Bat Feegan, and if Gillen was thus engaged he was worth investigating.

For at least half an hour the two men talked.

"They don't give up yet," thought Peter. "Is another plot under way? Ashby has bad enemies."

Finally Andy started and looked at his watch. Then he rose quickly and spoke to Bat in a different way. The latter also got up, and the pair passed out of the room.

The Plunger had not been seen, and he walked out after them. They paused near the building.

"Go home how," he overheard Andy say, "and get rid of your bruise. You don't look pretty."

"I'll have my revenge!" declared Feegan.

"Go ahead."

"Won't you walk down to my resort with me?"

"No; it is time for me to meet Beth Ashby, now."

Peter started.

"Wish I could go too," remarked Feegan.

"She would fall in a fit at sight of you."

"Hang it! ain't I as good as you?"

"Of course, Bat, but you ain't pretty. Don't think of it; it is my special privilege to see Beth, and I must hustle to get there."

CHAPTER XIX.

A ROUGH EXPERIENCE.

BEWILDERED, the detective listened to the words of the blackmailers. It was hard to believe that Andy was in earnest when he spoke of seeing Beth Ashby, and yet every thing in his manner went to show that he was perfectly serious in all he said.

"He, see her!" muttered Peter. "Why, she might as well see the Evil One, him self."

Andy and Feegan parted, and then the former walked briskly off.

"He must mean it," thought the sport. "Does she know the sort of person he is? Well, it ain't any of my business—Yes, it is, by my life! She may not know, and she may be going to run into danger in her ignorance. I will see this out!"

Quickly he followed Andy, and the pursuit thus begun was kept up for half an hour. When Gillen slackened his speed he was on Fifth avenue, a short distance north of Washington Square. Always a quiet locality, it was one after nightfall where the noise and hurry of the city seemed to have relapsed into literal slumber.

Andy had arrived by way of a cross street. He moved around to the avenue and stood looking northward. Pete came as close as he dared and then took refuge in a doorway.

A few minutes passed and then Gillen suddenly made a motion as if he saw something which pleased him.

"Has it come?" wondered the spy.

There was a sound of light, quick footsteps, and then he saw a female form appear beside that of the blackmailer.

"Beth!" he muttered. "Great heavens! does she know what she is doing?"

Evidently she did in one way if not in another. She met Gillen with calmness, and the two began to talk.

Pete did some rapid thinking. He was anxious to know the object of the meeting, not because he had any desire to pry into Beth's affairs, but because sure that Andy had a scheme under way which boded ill to her. He saw that he could go close to the corner around which they stood and have some hope of overhearing them without being seen himself.

He took the risk and gained the place without mishap. Then he became motionless and keenly alert, and all their words were borne to his ears.

"Yes," Beth was saying, "you have kept

your word thus far. How much further have you done it?"

"I have been unlucky in one respect," Gillen replied.

"How?"

"In seeing the man I most wished to see."

"Is there no advance?"

"Oh, yes."

"What is it?"

"My detective is pressing more closely upon the heels of the gang of which the missing man is a member, and though that man has not been seen, it is only a matter of a short time before he will be discovered."

"Are you sure his name is Webb?"

"Yes."

"And that he had no confederate?"

"I have no reason to believe there was one. You asked me that on the other occasion," added Gillen, thoughtfully. "May I ask what you have in mind?"

"Something too vague to be mentioned," replied Beth.

"Do you think there were two, and that you know who one of them is?"

"No, oh! no."

"If so, it may hasten matters to tell me of it."

"I know nothing," asserted Beth.

"My detective bureau is indebted to such vague clues for its richest finds."

"The villain!" indignantly thought Plunger Pete, "he has represented himself as a detective."

"I do not know of any possible criminal," repeated the girl.

"Bad!"

"Do you doubt your success?"

"Not in the least," reponded Andy, hastily. "As I told you at the beginning, I would not approach you for money unless I was sure of the thing. I also told you then that Darius Ashby was under suspicion, but that he could be saved without the annoyance of knowing he was suspected, or being defended. I had rather come to you than to him, and this I did. Rest easy; we will save him, and when those jay country detectives think their web the tightest around Ashby we will show them that it is but a tissue."

Beth sighed deeply.

"I hope so."

"My bureau never fails."

"Since the man Webb has not been found I suppose there is nothing more to be done now, is there?"

"Ahem! Well, you see the funds you gave me are about run out, and if you could give me fifty dollars I could use it so as to expedite matters amazingly."

Andy stood revealed fully to Peter. The former was working in all possible ways to do his business of blackmail. Beth was under tribute, and that Darius was not was owing to his hard common-sense, knowledge of the world and courage.

Now, the girl hesitated.

"You told me this would not cost much."

"Has it done so?" inquired Gillen.

"Not yet, but you seem always to want money."

"Do you know of anything in New York that can be done without money, miss?"

"No."

A moment longer she hesitated, and then she took out her purse.

"You shall have fifty dollars," she promised, "but when can I expect news of favorable progress?"

"Can you meet me here two nights later?"

"Yes."

"Do it, and you shall have news. I can promise that almost positively, miss."

"Enough! Here is the fifty dollars."

She put out the hand which held the sum named, and Andy reached to secure it. Both were occupied with the work, and neither had seen or heard anything to indicate the presence of a third party. Thus, they had a complete surprise.

Another hand touched Beth's and prevented the exchange.

"Stop!" commanded a third voice.

Beth and Andy started. Completely taken aback they looked to see the meaning of the interruption. Plunger Pete stood before them.

"Keep your money!" he added; "if you give it up you will be victimized by a rascal!"

Nobody answered him. They were too much surprised, and Andy, at least, was frightened. He had been detected in his blackmailing scheme. Would justice follow?

There was a period of inactivity, and then Beth recognized the new-comer.

"Brand!" she uttered, bewildered.

"Yes, it is I, and I have come none too quick. If you carry out your intentions you will regret it. You are dealing with a blackmailer!"

"What new plot is this?" cried Beth. "Am I again in your toils, Peter Brand? Are you still the evil genius of my life? What new plot, I say, have you against me?"

Andy Gillen was quick of wit. He had recognized Pete, himself, and he had done more. He was shrewd enough to detect the hostility in the girl's tone, and he knew that though he had met an enemy she had not met a friend. He acted on this knowledge.

"Miss," he exclaimed, "look well to your pocket. This fellow is a sneak-thief, I doubt not, or a pickpocket. Hold your money tight."

"I know him well, and his arts will not prevail. He need not pose as a helper, for his way is too familiar."

"He lies in all he says about me, miss," asserted Andy.

"I know his infamy well."

The detective was too much dismayed to speak. When he interrupted he had not paused to consider his own fragile standing with Beth, and her severity told him all too plainly that he had espoused a cause where his good intentions needed to be backed up by strong evidence.

Worse was to come. Andy had gained the slightest of advantages, but he was scared to think what might happen next. He looked around, considering the advisability of precipitate flight, and then the dread figure of a patrolman dawned upon his vision.

The officer had put in an appearance, and, seeing that there was trouble in the group, he was hastening toward the spot.

Gillen's blood seemed to chill, but he saw the need of desperate action and prepared for it. He caught at the one hope.

"This way, officer?" he exclaimed.

"This man has been trying to blackmail the lady!"

He had not intended to speak the word "blackmail," but it had rolled off his tongue without his consent, somehow, and the work was done.

"Ha!" cried the policeman, "is this so? Then he is just the chap I want to see. You are my prisoner, fellow!"

He clapped his hand on Peter's arm.

"No, no!" declared the Plunger; "it is not true. Tell him it is not."

His gaze was on Beth, and he was stunned when she replied:

"Officer, it is true. I wish him arrested!"

CHAPTER XX.

INKROD'S DEATH IS MENTIONED.

WITH unnaturally-expanded and wild eyes Plunger Pete gazed at the speaker. He had been prepared for a great deal, but for this, no! She would have him arrested—and he had been trying to do her a service!

Beth remained unmoved by the gaze he fixed upon her. At that time she was too much excited to reason, and she did not know what she had said. Above all she dreaded to have public exposure, and this she imagined—vain hope!—she was staving off by what she did.

"I'll trot him over to Jefferson Market," added the patrolman, with calm obliviousness to all but his prisoner. "Blackmail, is it?"

"No, he did not try to blackmail me."

"I thought you said he did."

"He only—only molested me."

"Ah! disorderly conduct, then."

"Yes."

"All right."

"Beth, you will not do this?" cried Peter. "Will I not? You will see."

"Arrested? I arrested for annoying you?"

"Then you should not have done it."

"I did nothing of the sort; you know I

did not. Beth, do not disgrace me thus. I never was arrested in my life. Do not put me to the disgrace now. Did I molest you? Did I do aught but what was for your good? Think again!"

"A glib-tongued rascal," commented the officer.

Looking only at Beth, the Plunger added:

"Consider what I said when I came to you. Consider what I did. Is there one thing which goes to condemn me? Have I ever done you any injury? Think of the past, and then tell me if you will put this disgrace upon me."

Beth's gaze was averted.

"Will you not explain that this is a mistake?"

"I can do nothing," she replied, coldly.

"I came to you as a friend. Did I ever come otherwise?"

"Always!"

"Don't be hasty, Beth. Stop and think it all over. I have told you more than once that I would never do you any harm, and I say so now. Will you not believe me your friend," pleaded the Plunger, "and not do this thing? It is no trifling matter to be locked up in a prison cell. Free me from that; free yourself from the trouble of appearing against me in court."

Beth started.

"What?" she cried.

"Don't you weaken, miss," urged the patrolman. "Just send him over Jefferson Market way to-night, and appear against him in the morning."

"Appear against him?" cried Beth.

"Yes."

"Shall I have to do that?"

"Of course. We can't convict the fellow without your testimony."

"But I never could endure that!" she declared. "The publicity, the disgrace—Oh! I can't do it!"

"But you'll have to."

"I can't, and I will not!" she cried. "I would die before I would do it. I never was in a court-room, but I am sure the horror of the place would drive me mad!"

"You have this opinion of going there as a witness," put in Plunger Pete. "What do you think of sending *me* there as a prisoner, accused of a mean crime?"

A swift change came to Beth's face.

"What would it be to *me*?" added Peter.

"I did not think of it that way!" admitted the girl, her voice low and unsteady.

"You say it would be a disgrace to go there as a witness. What would it be to go as a prisoner?"

"I did not understand. You did not deserve this, and I am very sorry for my mad haste. I was cruel, unwomanly, unjust and mad. I beg your pardon; I beg your pardon!"

Beth had been very bitter against the Plunger, and, believing he was ever plotting against her, she had more than once been led into error. It was so when she threatened to have him arrested. She was not so hard and vindictive as circumstances made her seem, but she regarded her life as ruined, believed him guilty of all, and thought he was still scheming to do her injury.

Now, the womanly part of her nature came to the front.

"You are safe," she added. "I will not accuse you."

"He don't get out of it so easy," asserted the officer, warmly. "I won't be party to hiding crime. If you won't appear against him I'll rely on your friend to do it. Eh?"

The speaker had turned. While they had been having their talk one voice had been conspicuous only by its silence. One person had said nothing. The patrolman wheeled to invoke his aid, and then stood surprised and baffled. While they had all been so much occupied one with the other Mr. Andrew Gillen had taken quiet leave.

"Well, I'll be jiggered!" quoth the blue-coat.

Beth was as much surprised as he, but she was relieved. Now that the alleged detective had taken himself out of sight there was a clearer track, and she thought she saw her way out of the trouble.

"Skipped, has he?"

Muttering thus, the officer suddenly turned upon those who remained.

"What does this mean?" he demanded.

"I don't know," replied Beth.

"Was the other fellow your friend?"
"No."
"Why has he shied off?"
"I don't know, sir."
"You don't, eh? Well, see here—are you going to appear against this chap?"
"No, sir."

"Then I wash my hands of the whole affair. I'm not on this beat to be mixed up in a family row with the parties ready to weaken the minute they get me on the string; that isn't my way. Unless you want to do the business act I'll leave you to yourselves."

"You can go, officer. I thank you for your zeal," added the girl, diplomatically, "and I am pleased to see that if your aid had been needed I should have found you a worthy champion."

"Never mind the pretty talk: the whole thing was a flunk, and that is all there is to it. Let it drop; I shall be saved the trouble of appearing in court, and I'd rather you would weaken now than further on. Are you all right?" he added, with a glance at Peter.

"Yes."
"Then I'm off."

The patrolman went so suddenly that Beth had no time to remonstrate, and she found herself left alone with the sport. He stood in silence, watching her, and waiting for her next decision.

That she was moved to find herself thus placed was clear in her every look. She was embarrassed, and her usual ready speech was lacking. It was, however, left for her to break the silence.

"I suppose you think I have done you injustice," she murmured, in a low tone.

"It wasn't carried on to the end," patiently returned the Plunger.

"Was I all wrong?"
"Yes."

"What was the truth?"
"The man who was with you called himself a detective, did he?"

"Yes."
"He lied!"
"Then what was he?"

"A blackmailer! I know him well. His name is Andy Gillen, and he is a loafer and rouneder. He never did an honest thing in his life, I do believe, and as for this case, he had nothing but blackmail in mind. He, a detective! Why, he's a law-breaker all around, and as mean a snake as New York can show. Yes, his purpose was simply to be rid of you of money, and that's what I told you when I first interfered."

"Then I thank you for saving me from his clutches."

"I reckon he will now let you alone."
"And you?"

"What of me?" soberly asked Peter.
"What do you know," added Beth, regarding him sharply, "about the man he wanted to find as the real slayer of Inkrod?"

"The man was a myth. He don't know who killed Inkrod."

"Do you?"
"No."

"Peter Brand, don't you think they will learn who it was?"

"I hope so."
"You are the same as ever."

"I don't know what you mean," returned Pete, his resentment growing into rough retort, "but I presume you have some new accusation to bring against me. Possibly you think *I* did it."

Spurred on, Beth swiftly answered:
"I know you did!"

"What?" the Plunger gasped.
"Listen to me!" exclaimed the girl. "The night that Inkrod was killed I saw you on the Ashby grounds, carrying a revolver, and in a few minutes I heard the report of the weapon. Then Inkrod was found dead. Your crime is no secret; I know who killed the horse-dealer!"

His face grew ashen, and he looked at her as if he was about to part with his lease of life.

His tongue seemed palsied for awhile, but as the reaction began to take place he found speech.

"No, no!" he cried. "You don't mean it!"

"I do."
"I, I, killed Inkrod?" he uttered.

"Yes," inexorably replied Beth.
"Has it come to thie? Is there nothing too bad for me to be guilty of? What will come next?—what can come? I, I? Never, never! Girl, you are mad!"

His vehemence moved her to less aggressive methods, and she modified the accusation.

"I did not see it, but I have told you what I actually did see."

"What?"
"I was in the grounds that night, before Inkrod left the house, and I saw you on the lawn. It was such a surprise that, though my vision appeared clear enough, I was reluctant to believe the evidence of my own sight. I had not seen you for so long—why should you be there?"

"It was hard to believe—but it was true."

"Admitting what I know to be true, I saw you walk across the grounds. You did not see me. You went on steadily, carrying in your hand a drawn revolver, and seeming to be on the lookout for some one. Twice you paused and surveyed the house."

"I can understand now that you expected somebody to come out."

"You disappeared. I had felt sure, at first, that it was you, but as I thought of it the more I decided that I must have been deceived, and as memory, thus aroused, went back to the scenes of other days, I remained by the tree in deep thought for about a minute, perhaps."

"I was aroused by the sound of a revolver-shot. It came from the quarter toward which you had just gone."

"I gave it no serious heed then, but it served to arouse me, and I quickly returned to the house. After that you came; I mean, after the murder. You said you had but just come to the vicinity, and was a stranger there."

"I know it to be false. You were there when the deed was done."

"Dare you insist in the face of such evidence that you did not kill Inkrod?"

Peter had listened closely, and with more of patience than was to be expected. The first shock of the accusation was past, and he tried to be meek. After all, what did it matter if he was accused of murder by her? It was nothing new to be accused by Beth.

Quietly he replied:
"You did see me that night."

"You admit it, then?"
"I was passing the place when a vicious dog ran out and tried to assault me. I drove him off, but not until the struggle had aroused my temper. Acting on that aversion which all men have to dogs which may be afflicted with hydrophobia, I determined to kill the brute. I took out my revolver and followed to the grounds."

"I hunted for him, but did not find him."

"Finally I left the place and went on to the station. I returned to New York and slept there that night."

"When I appeared at Ashby's after the crime I told no untruth. I was a stranger in the place, despite my one previous visit, and though, according to your statement, it was there that I found the dog to assail me, I did not know that to be the fact; I did not know I had been there before, and I said so."

"Last of all, I did not kill Inkrod. I did not see him that night; I did not know he was near; and though I did cross the grounds with a drawn revolver, it was not to injure any human being."

"Such is the truth, Miss Beth."
Steadily the explanation had been made, and it had an air of candor, but when he was done the listener said nothing.

"Do you doubt my word?" he asked.

"Frankly, I do."

"The old story," observed Peter, with a sigh.

"What do you expect?"
"From you, nothing good."

"Do you think anybody would credit the

CHAPTER XXI.

A STARTLING PROJECT.

BETH had not intended to speak as she did. Through many days she had kept silence, but the impulse came to her suddenly to let Pete Brand know she knew, and the accusation was out.

It fell with crushing force. Guilty or innocent, the sport was not prepared for it.

story you have told to account for your presence on the grounds? Would a judge, or jury, believe the explanation?"

"I only know that it's true."

"Did you hear the revolver shot?"

"No."

"How could you avoid it?"

"It is easy to infer that the one minute which you think you gave to thought, after seeing me, was much longer than that. People are not likely to be able to guess on time when in deep thought. No doubt it was a period of several minutes, and time enough to let me leave the grounds and get out of hearing."

"It is far from my purpose to bring public charge against you on this subject—if it can be avoided—so we will not argue it. It was a severe blow to me to meet you, anyhow, and I would not see you in a felon's cell. Severe! Why, when I reached the piazza I fainted from the excess of my emotions."

"Am I so abhorrent to you?" asked Peter, in a low, shaken voice.

"You and I ought never to have met. We were as little suited to each other as night and day. What taste did we have in common?"

"None," he admitted.

"We were—don't think I have any mean motive in saying it—not of the same rank in life."

"True!"

"At the start I saw this—when I knew you as you were."

"Yes," meekly agreed Peter.

"We made an awful mistake."

"We did," he replied, soberly.

"Death will right it," added Beth, in a hopeless way.

"Ha!" exclaimed the plunger, "You give me an idea!"

"What is it?"

"If I kill myself you will be free and happy."

"You talk foolishness," wearily observed Beth.

"Foolishness?"

"Of course you will do nothing of the sort."

"Will I not? I am not so sure of that. What would it matter? You have yourself pronounced judgment on me that I am worse than an incumbrance on the face of the earth. I can end that by committing suicide."

Beth did not reply. She regarded the half-made threat as too remote a possibility to be considered, and she let it drop. So did Pete, but the idea was in his mind, and he was dissatisfied enough for even such a rash step.

He stood looking down at the sidewalk until the girl aroused.

"I am going now," she stated quietly.

"I will go with you to a safe place—"

"It is not necessary. Good-night!"

It was unusual for her to speak a word of farewell, but he returned it mechanically, and then watched her as she went up the avenue.

"The way is fairly safe," he muttered, "and she would resent my action if I followed. I guess she will go on all right."

While Beth was thinking:

"He denied that he killed Inkrod, but there was not much life or persistence in the denial."

She might have looked more closely and seen that repeated accusations on her part had blunted Peter Brand's feelings until he received the fresh one without the natural emotions of one thus assailed, be he guilty or innocent.

The Plunger watched her out of sight, and even then he did not start from his position. He fell into deep thought.

"Yes," he murmured, "if I kill myself it will free her, but would it be best? If I did it now would it not be too early for her good? A few days more will not harm her so very much, and I may be useful. Is it not better that I should delay until this is all settled? I think it is. Then I will act on her suggestion and put an end to myself. I have no business to be around and annoy her."

It was a line of reasoning very much like himself, and unlike that of other men. More, he meant it all.

"Before I do it," he went on, "I must do my detective work and solve the mys-

tery of Inkrod's taking off. It will let her see that I am not so bad as she paints me, and it will end this charge against Darius Ashby."

He meditated on the connection of Andy Gillen and Bat Feegan with the subject, but could not see that appearances indicated any more than that they were playing their trade of blackmail.

"I don't think they killed Inkrod," he decided.

He went home.

He sat down and thought a good deal. Then he went to a drawer and took out a razor. He felt of its edge.

"It is keen enough for the work," he murmured. "When I have settled this other matter I will use it. She has given me the hint, and I will act upon it. Yes, I'll kill myself, and then she will be free!"

CHAPTER XXII.

THE DEATHLESS HATRED.

On the piazza of the Ashbys' country-house Catholine was standing. She looked down the drive and saw Darius riding across the grounds. He did not give any indication of coming to her, so she left her place and went to him.

He was mounted on a handsome bay horse which was going with a dancing, coquettish step. He paused at sight of her and allowed her to join him.

"This is my new purchase, Cathie," he exclaimed.

"Red Royal?"

"Yes."

"You have never had another horse equal to him in looks."

"You are right. He's a beauty, and full of speed. Next year I expect to win every hunt we have."

"Hasn't he a vicious element in his nature?"

"Yes. That is plain to be seen, and the groom has acquired a sort of awe of him, but he is kind enough. I have ordered that nobody attempt to ride him but myself, for I think there might be trouble."

"If he is vicious I am not satisfied to have you ride him, Darius," declared Catholine, anxiously.

"I am not a braggart, but I never saw a horse yet which I could not control. I think Red Royal realizes the fact. Of course any horse with life in him knows when he has met his master, and he generally gives in, then. Red Royal is full of life, but he is not tricky. The really dangerous beast is the one who is given to sudden ebullitions of ugliness. Red Royal does not seem inclined that way. His temper is even."

"I don't like his barbarian eyes."

"I like his spirit and vim," laughed Darius.

He caressed the neck of the blood bay, and then added.

"How soon shall you be ready to go home?"

"Whenever you choose."

"Then we will not delay much longer. I will stable Red Royal and come to the house. Walk beside me."

He turned the head of the horse and Catholine fell in as directed. They were progressing thus when a turn in the path suddenly brought them face to face with a man who had been walking their way. Darius pulled up the blood bay, while the man as suddenly stopped.

"Luke Harkness!" breathed Catholine, nervously.

Darius had not expected to see his old rival, but he rallied quickly and spoke politely.

"How do you do, Mr. Harkness? This is a surprise."

The ex-slave of the Arabs was slow with his reply, and there were signs of a struggle for composure before he had anything to say. When he did speak he was calm enough.

"I hope I don't intrude?"

"No, oh! no."

"I was passing the grounds, and I just thought I would cross here."

"Quite right."

Luke had looked at Darius and at Catholine, and his gaze now wandered to Red Royal. It was a peculiar look he gave the horse, but he made no comments.

"Have you regained your health since you located in New York?" inquired Darius, in a friendly way.

Harkness passed his hand over his thin face.

"Does the flesh show here?" he returned, with perceptible bitterness. "The worn rock never resumes its old form. That look, those furrows, the haggard appearance all came through long suffering."

He sent a glance from his sullen eyes to Catholine.

"A slave through many days," he added. "I have been scourged; I have suffered from thirst, hunger and weakness, and when night came I lay down in bonds, worse than any black slave of America ever knew. Ay, worse than a dog, for he is free to lie down unbound at night when his master's service is done."

"We feel for you," asserted Darius.

"Thank you. I know what it is to suffer. May you live long to know rest and peace."

Another sidelong look at Red Royal, and then a slight smile came to his moody face. Something about the horse had meaning for him, it seemed.

The expression of the last wish was so manifestly insincere, in Catholine's view, that she was more than ever troubled. Luke Harkness worried her. His evasive, secret eyes were not those of a man given to honorable practices. Darius, in the fullness of his heart, feeling in his own happiness what the ex-slave had lost, was disposed to regard him only with pity. Catholine looked deeper; she saw a little of Luke's heart, or thought she did—and her sight was good—and she wanted to flee from him.

"Pardon me," continued Darius, "if I offer to assist you in any way I can. Should you wish to engage in business I will cheerfully use my influence to get you a desirable situation."

"That is good of you," said Luke, looking at the ground, "but I am not in need. I am doing very well."

"Bear my offer in mind. It holds good indefinitely."

"Just now I do not want anything. If the situation should change"—here he glanced at Red Royal again—"I may be heard from. I will keep track of you. Something may occur."

Catholine shivered. Why? She could not have answered the question, but the fear of Luke was growing. She saw a part of his heart. Could she have seen it all—But she did not, and he looked at Red Royal and waited for what he expected would come.

The talk was stilted. The companionship was uncongenial, and speeches were found with difficulty. It was this, perhaps, which made Harkness cut it short and go his way.

Catholine gazed after him and shivered again.

"Why did he come here?" she exclaimed.

"He said he was passing, and thought he would cross the grounds."

"Darius, I am in horror of that man."

"Do not feel thus. Did you notice how much calmer he was than when he was here before?"

"That proves nothing. I fear him! Darius, do not be alone with Luke Harkness—I fear him!"

Ashby did not laugh. He was enough of a student of human nature to feel that the ex-slave was not a man to be honored. He gave no honor, but he did give him a degree of pity—because he had lost such a prize as Catholine. Even with this pity he was not disposed to make Luke his friend, but if the wanderer was in financial need, he was more than ready to give it.

Now, Darius consoled his wife as much as possible, and then went with Red Royal to the stable. The groom moved to take the horse into the stall, but Red Royal put his shapely ears back in a way which made the man jump back.

It was Darius who led him into the stall.

"Otis," he remarked, "I wish you could get over your fear of this horse."

"Did you ever know me to be afraid of a horse, sir?"

"No."

"Well, I am of this one."

"He knows it, and that makes the trouble all the greater."

"Well, the fact is, I'm looking for him

to make a break, some day. I believe the devil is in that horse, Mr. Ashby!"

"If you look for an angelic temper in him you will get left, but I see nothing to indicate that Red Royal will ever be master when I am in charge."

It was not a boast, but a plain statement made to encourage Otis. He, however, was not encouraged to any great degree. He had no love for the blood bay.

In the mean while Luke Harkness was walking off.

"Singular that Ashby has got along so well with Demonio, the fiend," he thought, "but I suppose the explanation lies in the fact that Ashby is such a fine horseman. He has thus far kept the brute from destruction, but it will not last. One of these days Demonio will make his old, headlong break. I was a fool to come up here to-day, but I was anxious to see if anything had occurred. I will keep away, after this, for even my presence might tell against me."

Walking steadily on he reached the station and, from there, took his way to New York. Going to his old haunts he found Andy Gillen and Bat Feegan. Between himself and Andy quite an intimacy had sprung up, and Feegan often kept them company because he was Andy's associate.

Harkness did not know of the blackmailing scheme under way, nor did he suspect that they were interested in Ashby's case, but he did know of their general habits of life, and he regarded them none the less highly in consequence.

The trio were together until well into the evening. Then Andy and Bat went out.

"Will you keep me company further?" asked Gillen.

"I've got somethin' else," replied Feegan.

"What?"

"Biz!"

"Secret?"

"Comes near it."

"And I am not in. Well, I don't care; I can kill time. So-long, old man!" and Andy walked away.

Bat smiled.

"Yes, I've biz," he muttered, "an' Ashby will soon know it!"

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE BOWERY WOLVES.

BAT FEEGAN's address, as before stated in these pages, was somewhere in the Bowery. He knew this thoroughfare in all its ways. He had been born on the Bowery, was reared there, had fought there, played his game of tough there, and generally confined his diplomatic work to its wide stretches, though he knew the side-streets well, and had broken the law all the way from the East River to the North.

Naturally, his associates were of the Bowery. One of them was known as Shiner Duff. On the evening last referred to Bat had an engagement with Shiner, and when he left Andy Gillen he proceeded to keep it. He met Shiner where the disreputable Bowery runs up against the walls of the Cooper Institute and ceases to have its being.

"So you've come?" growled Shiner.

"Can't you see I hev? Say, have you the tools?"

"Sure, Mike!"

"Good! We'll be off."

"Have you made positive sure the coast is clear?"

"I ain't said no more ter find out, but I do know the Ashbys is in the hayseed region, an' it follers that they won't be at home. Come on!"

"Let's have a 'ball' first. Or shall we wait until we get near the plum?"

"Better do et now, so our breath will cool off afore we get there."

The pair visited a saloon. There their trade was welcome, but when they came out a passing patrolman looked at them suspiciously. It was their misfortune that they did not impress even a strange policeman favorably, and in the region where they were known so well there were many doubtful looks directed their way when they moved abroad. They were not molested now, and, cheered and fortified by the bad whisky, they rode northward until they were in a vicinity where the fine residences were in marked contrast to the rookeries of the Bowery.

Alighting, they walked into a side street.

"There she be," remarked Feegan.

He motioned to one of the houses.

"Dark, ain't et?" replied Shiner.

"Yes. It's safe ter believe they are all away."

"How do we strike her?"

"Come wid me."

They made a *detour* around the block, and then Bat abruptly entered a vacant space where a building had been pulled down to make room for a new structure.

"I'm on," quoth Shiner.

They threaded the area of the back yards, and thus approached the rear of the house they had marked. Once in its own yard they paused to look about more critically. They agreed that there was no sign of their having been seen, and then they went on with their work.

Shiner produced from under his coat several objects which would have been mysterious to the ordinary honest man, though far from so to those who trained with the Bowery wolves.

They were burglars' tools of the most approved plan.

"Now for the door!" ordered Feegan. "Oh! won't we have a good square feed if the servants don't get onter our curves!"

"That's jest your way; always lettin' nonsense interfere with biz."

"We're here ter crack the crib, an' we are goin' ter do et; but I say there ain't no nonsense in gettin' a feed when there's a chance. How is it?"

Shiner had tried his luck with the door.

"Wait a bit," he requested.

He worked away at the lock of the door for some time. It did not yield readily, but he knew his business well, and he persevered. Minutes wore on, and Feegan was getting impatient when there was a click which was music to his ears.

"Done!" he exclaimed.

"Sure!"

Shiner stood erect.

"Now et's your turn," he added.

"You bet I'm good fer et."

Bat laid his hand on the door and opened it carefully. There was no betraying sound, and he first listened and then passed calmly in. Discovery might come, but that was in the line of business.

The hall was perfectly dark and silent, and he moved along with Shiner at his heels. His mind was on the kitchen, and he turned that way and entered. There, too, all was still, but there was the faintest possible light from the dying fire in the range. He searched his pockets and then repeated:

"Give me a match!"

Shiner hunted obediently.

"I ain't got none," he replied, presently.

"Well, that's fine work, but I don't see as we need ter worry. I reckon there is plenty o' them in the room. Wait! here's a bit o' card in my pocket; part of a playin' card, I guess, an' et's as good as a royal flush, jest now. I'll light et by the blaze in the range, an' then we won't have ter poke around in the dark fer matches, an' take the resk o' knockin' a dozen chairs over."

Feegan took out the card and used it as indicated, after which he threw the remnant of the pasteboard on the hearth.

A light was going, at last, and they surveyed their surroundings. Bat was true to his instincts, and he proceeded to hunt up the larder. There was enough to eat there to fill his lawless soul with joy, and he made the most of it, an operation in which Shiner did not scruple to join.

They ate heartily, delaying their going about other work with the coolness of old hands.

"Done!" announced Bat, finally. "Göt yer gun ready, Shiner?"

"Yes."

"Don't use et unless you have ter, but don't allow no mean trick played on us."

"Well, I guess not."

"Come on!"

"Up-stairs?"

"Yes."

"What ef they should be at home?"

"I'm sure all but the two or three servants are away. Come!"

They started, and were soon creeping up the stairs, revolvers in hand, as desperate and dangerous a pair as ever broke into a

house in New York. The revolvers were not for show, and they would use them to kill if their own liberty was at any time in jeopardy.

First of all they entered the parlor. It was a finely-furnished room, but they molested nothing there. Unless they had ill-luck elsewhere, they did not intend to take anything cumbersome, for they had learned from experience that it was not policy to carry bundles through the streets.

Continuing, they went to the second floor, and in the first room entered they saw some signs which filled their souls with joy. On the table lay a gold watch and a purse.

"Cricketty - bob!" exclaimed Feegan, "this is a royal flush!"

"Get on to de ticker!" murmured Shiner, raptly.

"Le's see wo't de leather has in it."

Feegan had his hand on the purse, and he opened it in haste. The result was not particularly gratifying.

"A few silver coins, a key, an Elevated ticket an' a lot o' bits o' cloth," he remarked, in disgust.

"That's a woman's leather, Bat."

"Sure!"

"Well, de ticker is worth a good round sum."

"That it is, ole feller."

"Pocket it, an' le's push on."

The wolves were growing rash. The food they had eaten had filled their stomachs at the expense of their heads, it seemed. The watch should have warned them that there were more than servants in the house, but they did not take the hint.

Next in the line of search was the adjoining room, with folding doors connecting it with the one they were in. To these folding doors they went, and Feegan put his hand out and pulled with more of strength than reason.

Back went the door with a very audible sound.

"Cheese it!" muttered Shiner, beginning to be cautious.

"I reckon it's all right."

"Wait a bit!"

They did wait, but as there was nothing to be heard they soon moved again. Entering the room, they looked for the gas-fixture.

"Here she is!" finally announced Feegan. "Strike a brimstone."

Shiner obeyed, and he was about to apply it to the gas, when something warned him of danger. He hesitated and then turned. Back of them was a tall figure which, according to his notion, ought not to be there. Shiner dropped the match, and an exclamation of dismay at one and the same time.

"What's this?" demanded the new-comer, sharply

Neither of the wolves was ready with a reply.

"Walk into the light," was the further demand. "If you try to refuse, I will blow your brains out!"

It was a sanguinary threat, but one justified by circumstances, for the new comer was Darius Ashby. He had caught the burglars in the act, and their way was not to be so easy.

Feegan rallied to the emergency.

"Knife the bloke!" he hissed.

CHAPTER XXIV.

WHAT THE CARD DID.

DESPERATE men were the Bowery wolves, and, now that they were thus caught, they were ready for anything. Human life went for nothing with them, and they were not at all reluctant to carry out the order given by Bat Feegan.

As he spoke he drew his knife and made a forward movement, but it was not a success. Darius Ashby knew how to deal with his kind.

Crack!

A bullet tore through Bat's clothes and sliced a piece off of his skin. He stopped short.

Click! click!

It was the sound of the recocking of the revolver, and Shiner knowing that action alone could save them, plunged forward like a mad animal, his hand raised to strike with the knife he held.

Crack!

Again the report, but it could not be repeated. Both the wolves were upon Darius, and he had need to be busy. Would he be equal to the demands of the occasion?

Feegan swung his hand aloft and aimed a tremendous blow, but just then something happened. He received a blow which knocked him off his feet like a smitten bullock. He fell with a crash. Then Shiner had his turn. He struck, but the knife found only space.

Another moment and Shiner had cause to be unhappy. A neat blow rattled his teeth and made him dizzy, after which the clinched hand of the defender of home played like a flash upon the burglar. Blow after blow was rained upon him, and the knife fell from his hand. He tried to use his own fist, but each effort was futile. Dazed by the fierce onslaught to which he was subjected he made the weakest kind of resistance, and all the while he was under punishment.

Feegan was up, at last, but he rose just in time to see his comrade in crime fleeing wildly, and Feegan gained an idea. There must be a dozen men against them, he argued, and discretion was the wiser part of valor.

He, too, fled precipitately.

Down the stairs thundered the burglars, and with hot haste they made for the exit. A race of champions would not have been more zealously contested.

At last the outer door was seen. They heard the pursuer in the rear, and they dashed out of the door. Beyond them was the high fence of the yard, but even Stiner, dazed though he might be, was equal to the emergency.

If they had just rivaled sprinters they now pressed the jumping stars closely, and both went over the obstruction like hurdlers. Then they raced as swiftly toward the next street.

Fortunately for them there was no policeman to note their mad exit, and as the pursuit had ceased, they had only to keep on. This they did until several blocks had been put between themselves and the house they had seen enough of. By a lamp they paused.

"Oh!" groaned Shiner.

"Oh!" echoed Feegan, lugubriously.

"Be we still alive?"

"I reckon, though there is a hot feel along my hide which tells me there is a hole there."

"My face—"

Shiner put up his hand and took it away with a red stain on it which was not to be mistaken.

"He got at me there," added the wolf.

"Got at ye? Well, I should say he did! Why, man, you look like a piece o' rare steak!"

"Be I hurted bad?"

"Be ye? You're like a steak, I say."

"Oh!" groaned Shiner.

"Oh! oh!" echoed Feegan.

"He was a fiend!"

"He? Why, man, there was seven of them."

"Was there?" doubtfully asked Shiner.

"Yes."

"So there was, an' six on 'em was at me at once!"

"We've got bad left."

"Yes, but we've got de ticker, by gee! an' that is— Eh?"

Shiner had put his hand into his pocket. The result brought a look of dismay to his face.

"Hully gee! the ticker is gone!" he gasped. "Shoot me ef I didn't drop et durin' that scrimmage!"

The wolves stared at each other blankly, and their spirits were utterly crushed. In every place on Shiner's bruised visage where there was room for expression his woe was revealed.

"Dead left!" he added, with a groan. "Not a thing as a s'uven'er but this!" and he touched his face.

"An' this," continued Feegan, feeling of his own wound.

"We are ruined, old man."

"See here," pursued Bat, an ugly gleam coming into his eyes, "I ain't done with that critter yet. He didn't use us as a gentleman orter, an' I'll hev revenge ef I wear my uppers out lookin' fer it. See? I'll git square with him yet!"

"Done!"

Shiner put out his gory hand quickly, but at that moment the sound of footsteps called their attention to the fact that a policeman was advancing. It was enough, and they beat a retreat. For the night their adventure was over, but the defeat was rankling, and they were men to keep the vow of revenge they had made.

In the meanwhile the Ashby family had fully gathered in the house. Catholine, Beth and the servants came out of their rooms in considerable alarm, but Darius was as cool as ever. He had seen the burglars out, and when search had revealed the fact that no other member of the gang was in hiding, he soon put all in order.

He explained to his companions calmly.

"Is there any clue to their identity?" asked Beth.

"No," he replied; "I did not see them clearly."

"Do you think they were common robbers?"

"Doubtless."

"What did they get?"

"I found Catholine's watch on the floor. They must have had that and then dropped it. I do not think they took much away. We will examine the house fully."

It was done, and Darius's conclusion verified as to what they had taken away. It was when Darius was in the kitchen, that he noticed a bit of half-burned pasteboard on the floor. He stooped and picked it up. It was the remnant of a visiting card, and he saw a name, half-obliterated by the yellow stain of the fire, upon it.

He took the card closer to the light.

"Peter Brand!" he read, aloud. "Peter Brand," he repeated, musingly. "Where have I seen that name before?"

There was one who could have answered, but she was silent. Beth was startled by the occurrence of the name. What did it mean?

"Very familiar, but I do not place it," added Darius, slowly. "Still it is a clue."

"Why?"

Beth asked the question sharply.

"It was left by the burglars," quietly responded Ashby. "It is plain that they used it to light the gas. It may be the means of identifying them, later on."

"Do you really think it was theirs?"

"Undoubtedly. By using it they avoided some exposure which might result from using a match. Yes; they are in for it. This is the visiting card of one of the gang."

Beth shivered. She was cold. Her blood seemed like ice.

"Oh! the wretch! the wretch!" she murmured. "Has he fallen so low as that?"

Darius was very much in earnest with his subject, and he questioned everybody closely. All denied knowledge of the card, and the cook was positive in her assertion that it had not been on the floor when she retired.

"This settles the point," added Darius. "It is the clue by which I will find the burglars."

"Do you want to?" asked Beth.

"Why, of course. Don't you?"

"I do not," she replied, quickly. "Think of the exposure; of having our names in print. The affair at our country home was by far too much of this, and I shrink from more publicity. They got nothing. By all means let it rest, Darius. Let us avoid the exposure."

Catholine was of the same mind, and she joined her argument eagerly. Better bear it meekly and avoid advertising the fresh trouble.

"It may be best, though this is very different from the other case, and we need not hesitate to— Ha!"

"What?"

"I knew the name was familiar. Peter Brand! He was the person who came to our house as the friend of Hiram Inkrod. Yes, that's where I have heard the name. Aha! I think we have the robbers, and one of them is Peter Brand."

Beth grew sick at heart.

"It may be an error," she faltered.

"So it may, but it's not likely. Clearly, the card was left as suspected, and," he added, "the chances are all in favor of the idea that in Mr. Peter Brand we have our robber!"

CHAPTER XXV.

PLAIN TALK.

The following evening the Race Track Detective called at the boarding-house of Midget Merry and Silky Shaw. He found the latter in high spirits.

"Glad to see you, old man," he said to Peter, "but I can't be with you long. I'm going out, you see, and must be early to keep the engagement. I'm improving these evenings while Merry and I are taking our rest. Soon we'll be on the stage again, and then there will be no more evenings—you know Merry don't allow me to stay out after theater and do the night hawk act. She keeps me tied to her apron-strings as if we were man and wife!"

Silky laughed heartily at his own joke, but Merry did no more than to smile faintly.

"Are you to have a good engagement?" inquired Pete.

"Prime! Chances are thick as bees. Why, we refused five offers when Merry took the notion to rest. That's all right, though; if she was tired, it was best."

Silky was nothing if not good-hearted and jolly, and he rattled on thus until he went out and left Peter and Merry.

The girl sent a peculiar glance after him as he went, and if it had been explained it would have been a request that he would stay—stay so she need not be alone with Peter.

Blissfully unconscious of all this, the sport spoke when Silky disappeared.

"It does me good to hear of your good offers, Merry."

"Why?" she demanded sharply.

"Because you are prospering, and fresh prosperity comes with each new offer."

"I don't want offers!" declared Merry, with unexpected force.

"You—don't?" uttered Peter.

"No."

"Don't want business engagements?"

"No."

"Great Scott! why not?"

"This plea of mine that I needed a rest was all a pretense. I was never in better health than now, and I do not need rest any more than you do. I made the pretense because I did not want to be at work; that is all."

"Well, well, well! And with so much money coming in!" muttered Plunger Pete, supremely surprised.

"Yes."

"Merry, you are joking."

"I am not."

"Then what do you mean by all this?"

Merry had been steady and calm, while Peter was so much astonished that he was anything but practical. Her steadiness continued, while her next words shook him still further.

"I am going to give up the stage."

"Give it up!" gasped Peter.

"Yes."

"Surely, you are joking."

"I never was more in earnest. I am going to give up the stage."

Peter Brand stared at the speaker blankly. He moved uneasily in his seat, as if it had suddenly become an uncomfortable place.

He had rarely been so much surprised and disturbed. Merry had not only been his ward, in a sense, but he had felt for her a sincere friendship and interest. To hear such a remarkable statement was too much for his composure. She sat silent, and it was left for him to recover his self-possession when he could and continue the conversation.

"Why is this?" he finally asked, slowly.

"Because I have seen enough of the stage."

"What are you going to do?"

"I don't know yet; I am looking for something."

"Do you know what it is to look for work in this big city?—a city where a score of applicants wait for every one place open?"

"Yes."

"And do you think you could find a position where you can earn so much money as you do now?"

"I do not expect it."

"Then why do you give up what you have? There is your friend, Nellie Brauss. She studied to be a stenographer and typewriter. She is one now, but only gets thirteen dollars a week. Some girls in big luck get fifteen, but more fall under thirteen, I

reckon. How does that compare with your position? Then she is subject to a business man who makes her feel all the time that he is master. You can almost dictate your terms. Then she has to work hard from nine to six, every week day. Do you work as much as that? Why, it's with you a little study in the day, and half an hour on the stage in the evening?"

"You have spoken from a certain standpoint, and from that standpoint your argument is not to be overturned," replied Merry. "But, Mr. Brand, did it ever occur to you that there was something more than work, and more than dollars and cents?"

"What?"

"Association, character, reputation!"

"Eh?"

"Mr. Brand, you and I were brought up in a certain sphere of life, and we have looked at life from that sphere. I never looked beyond until recently, and I believe you never did. Let me ask you a few questions. Do you think the influences of the stage, and of the variety stage, in particular, are wholesome?"

The detective moved uneasily.

"There are black sheep in all callings," he answered, presently and with a show of reluctance, "but you are not in that class, Merry."

"Don't I have to associate with those in my calling?"

"Ye-es. That is, in a degree."

"Am I not known by the company I keep?"

"Not by your friends—"

"But by the world, I am. Let us face this truth, Mr. Brand. As I said before, you and I were brought up in a certain sphere of life. We see matters from that sphere of action. When I went on the stage I thought I had reached the upper round of human glory and human bliss. I see my mistake, now; I know it is not a wholesome calling, and I am going to forsake it. You and I have been blind, Mr. Brand. It is time for us to see; it is time for me to leave the stage, and for you to leave the life of a sport!"

"For me to leave—"

Peter stopped short in his speech.

"Yes."

"Merry, you must be joking."

"You get your living by playing the races, don't you?"

"Yes, chiefly."

"What do you do when you go there?"

"Why," glibly began the Plunger, "I take the train or boat and travel where I can see the scenery of land or water, according to where the race is; and a most healthful journey it is. The cool breeze of the bay fans my face—"

"This is not the practical part, Mr. Brand."

"Well, when I get there I go into the paddock and talk with the others there, and then—and then—"

"What next?"

"I go," added Peter, less glibly, "to the betting-ring and place my money on my choice; and then I go out by the rail and stand until the bugle sounds and the racers come out. They start, and the sight is one to make the blood turn to fire. The noble animals get the word and go speeding around the track like comets let loose—"

"After the race, what?"

"Well, if I win I cash my checks, and if I lose I tear them up."

"You live by this betting?"

"Yes."

"Are the influences wholesome?"

"Oh! I am an old stager, and such things don't affect me."

"Is the betting-ring a place of elevating character?"

Peter was silent. His mind went to the place named. He saw the dense crowds before the bookmaker's stands; he saw the bettors watching the ever-changing figures on the bookmaker's boards; he saw the grim, cool faces of the veterans, and the strained attention of the novice; he saw the wildly-moving mob, elbowing, pushing, struggling to get to the boards as figures to suit were offered on their choices, and he had to confess, mentally, that it was an Inferno on a small scale.

"Is there a bar where intoxicating liquors are sold?" added Merry.

"Ye-es."

"And this is your life?"

"Merry, you don't understand. I am an old hand—"

"Some others are not?"

"No."

"Do they win or lose the more?"

"Dead losers as a rule, I admit. But they learn!"

"Do they learn more than to win? Do they learn anything good?"

Plunger Pete seemed restless.

"Merry, you are too hard. This is a man's game and men are in it—"

"No women?"

"We—ell, yes; a good many of them; but they stay in the grand stand and make their bets by messenger."

"Yet, with all these influences, you defend the life! A place where men and women gamble frantically. Mr. Brand, if you and I would save ourselves we must abandon the life we lead!"

CHAPTER XXVI.

AN ALARM IS GIVEN.

THE detective sat and looked at Merry in silent wonder. He was not only surprised but bewildered. He and she had been engaged in business where they had made money. Neither of them had ever failed in this, and success was his criterion. That either calling was open to censure was little less than amazing.

Merry did not break the silence, so he had to do it.

"I see nothing wrong about the work we are in," he persisted. "We do not break any law, so where is the wrong of it?"

"It is purely the moral nature of it all. At the beginning I said that our early life and training, or want of training, had made us oblivious to the fact that we were in bad business. So it has been. Our eyes were closed; we knew not what we did. I know now, and I have told you. There can be no further excuse for us."

"And you want me to give up the track?"

"Yes."

In one respect Peter Brand had the nature of a child. He remembered how another woman had taken him to task for this very thing; he remembered how he had argued with her. She had not been willing to vouchsafe him chance to give up his career; she condemned him utterly and irrevocably for having been in it at all, and would not hear to him; but he had ascribed it all to her high rank in life—her false views of life, as he regarded it, based upon her position among the aristocrats of the land.

Now, the argument came from another quarter, and came with telling force. He liked Merry, and her word had far more force with him than was to be expected. Yet, she asked much.

'Give up the pleasure of the race-track?

His mind wandered; he saw, in imagination, the long, level stretch with its post-marked furlongs and half-furlongs, and he saw the horses, lean, noble racers mounted by jockeys in gay colors, speeding around the way with surprising bounds; he felt his blood thrill again as it always did on such occasions; he saw the winner rush toward the wire while the ocean-like murmur rose from the grand stand and the men at the rail forgot in that supreme moment all but the delirious excitement of the race.

Give it up?

Abandon the track forever?

The idea almost stunned him. Had it really been broached to him, or did he dream? Give it up? Why, it was the champagne of his life; the oasis of his very existence.

Give it up? He drew a quick, quivering breath, and then he heard Merry add, while her voice was like that of one far away:

"At least, I shall quit the stage forever."

Peter Brand rubbed his forehead in a helpless way.

"Merry," he replied, in a low tone, "you have taken me all by surprise, and I'm not fit to talk with you now. I want to think this over; I want to see if there is anything in your ideas. I can't tell off-hand, for you have sort of stunned me. I'll go now, Merry, and we'll speak of it again."

"Think well, Peter," she returned, gravely. "Think well, and see if there is not a

life more to be preferred than that of a gambler."

"But horse-racing is not cards."

"Is it any the less gambling?"

"Possibly not."

"It surely is not. It is gambling, and though we were reared in a social sphere where gambling was not regarded as a sin, we are now enlightened enough so that we ought to be aware that it is a disreputable recreation."

"Maybe it is."

"You know it is."

"Well, I'll think of it, Merry, and see if there is any foundation for what you say. Just now I can't see that there is."

A knock sounded at the door.

Merry rose and moved to open it.

If the truth had been told there was a grain of hope in her mind at that moment. She saw that she had moved Pete, and she knew it indicated influence on her part. She forgot that in his nature there was a grain of childishness, and it might be that she magnified her influence. Yet she was thinking:

"That other woman has not so complete mastery over him but that he will hear to me. All may not yet be with the other woman—if I can keep her away."

She opened the door.

Beth Ashby stood there.

Merry's color dwindled. "The other woman" was present already.

Speechless was Merry, but Beth broke the lull quickly.

"Can you tell me where Mr. Brand is?" she demanded.

Merry was too much surprised to answer quickly, and before more could be said Beth's gaze wandered to the Plunger. Evidently his face was a welcome sight for once, at least, for, though there was no light of friendship in the expression which came to her, there was the eagerness of one who has an object and is pleased to see it acquired.

She crossed the threshold and spoke again excitedly.

"You must flee," she cried.

"Eh?" replied slow-minded Peter.

"You must take to flight at once!" added Beth, emotion in every inflection.

"Thunder! you don't say so? Why?"

"You will be arrested, if you do not."

"I shall? What for?"

"Tell me, were you at the Ashby house last night?"

The pride in Peter's nature came to the front, and he unconsciously threw his head back as he retorted:

"Was I? Well, I reckon not! No I was not."

"I hope that is true, but it will not save you. You have no time for delay—you must go immediately. Go, go!"

She motioned to the door, but the sport stood firm. He was not going to flee from a shadow at any time, and most of all not when the name of the Ashby house had been brought up. That stirred him to the quick, and he was like a rock.

"I'm not running just now," he returned, coolly. "What are you talking about, anyhow?"

"Isn't it enough that I give you warning of your peril and advise you to save yourself?"

"No it is not!" was the sturdy retort. "If I were a criminal I dare say I should thank you for such advice, and get out as soon as possible, but I am not in fear of any man. Tell me why I am to be arrested, if you know?"

"Our house was robbed, last night."

"And must I necessarily be the criminal?"

"The burglars used your card—a card with your name on it—to light the gas."

"The dickens they did!"

"You see how it places you. Innocent or guilty you are in danger, and your hope is in flight."

"Then I'll go without hope," declared Peter. "I haven't robbed your house, or any other, and I won't flee from any danger that may rise from it. Who is going to arrest me?"

"My brother Darius is coming with a detective."

"Let him come."

"Will you not listen to prudence and save yourself?"

"When such a charge is made against me I will not run away if all New York is coming to arrest me. It is very much like the general way to have me accused if anything happens to the Ashby family, but it will not scare me. Let the arrest come; I can endure it if the Ashby family can."

"But I cannot!" declared Beth, sharply. "Don't you know I can't? You must not stay here. Go, I beseech you, go!"

"Young woman, I don't want to worry you, but this is a matter which concerns me more than any other human being, and as I am accused of divers fiendish things, I claim the right to know all about it. Burglars were at your house last night, and they used a card bearing my name to light the gas. So far, good; what else? I desire to know all about this."

Beth was in a fever of suspense, but it occurred to her that the quickest way to get clear of the sport was to tell all at once. This she did, concluding with these words:

"I convinced Darius, at the time, that it would be best to let the affair drop, rather than to have any scandal, but he has since changed his mind. I went out awhile this afternoon, and when I returned my sister-in-law told me he had obtained a policeman and was going to have you arrested."

"I have not seen him."

"He did not know where to look for you, but thought he could find you by due hunting."

A flush rose to Peter's cheeks.

"He need not hunt for me!"

"What do you mean?"

"I will go to him!"

"Go to him?"

"Yes."

"Surely, you will not be so rash?" cried Beth, struck with fresh terror.

"I start for Ashby's house immediately!" declared the Plunger.

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE DETECTIVE DEFENDS HIMSELF.

THE last assertion startled Beth afresh.

"What?" she cried.

"I am going to your brother's house at once," coolly replied Pete. "I will show him that I am not afraid to meet him. How my card came in the possession of the house-breakers I do not know, but I suppose I have given away thousands of them in my day, to race-men, politicians and the like, and it does not surprise me to learn that one of them has shown up. But I know not what card it was, nor how it came into the hands of the unknown; while as for having share in the break I did not, and I shall go to Ashby and tell him so."

It was a sturdy avowal, but it did not move Beth to the same confident spirit. She agitatedly exclaimed:

"You must not, shall not go!"

"I will go and proclaim my innocence."

"No, no!"

He picked up his hat.

"I go now."

"In Heaven's name forbear! Think what it will be to me!" and Beth clasped her hands imploringly.

"To you?"

"Yes; it will ruin me."

Peter threw back his head proudly.

"Am I a dog?" he demanded. "Ruin you? Have I not told you that I will never be the means of injuring you? Well, do I know the measureless hatred you bear me, and I would not have it otherwise if I could; but you are as safe as if you were my friend. Ruin you? Am I a dog? Girl, your name will not be mentioned."

"Then how will they account for your knowing of the accusation against you?"

"They will not account for it, for they will have no chance. It must satisfy them that I am there to answer for myself: they will know nothing more."

"Suppose they force you to tell?"

"Force me?"

The detective had been a patient, humble, child-like recipient of Beth Ashby's moods in the past, but the patience had been wearing away. He bore her no ill-will, but the manhood within him was asserting itself, and he rebelled against the repeated rebuffs and shocks he met with of late.

"Force me!" he repeated, defiantly. "Well, if they can do that the world will come to an end. Force me! Not if they threaten to kill me!"

"Still, why need you go?"

"To defend my honor!"

Shot-like was the retort, and Plunger Pete moved to the door. He turned to add:

"Bear in mind that you are safe from me. My tongue will never do you harm."

He went out.

In his indignation and haste he forgot for once that there might be danger for Beth in that locality. Giving no thought to anything but the matter nearest to his heart, he threaded the streets of the neighborhood until he reached the Elevated Road. Then he took a train and moved northward.

It was only a short time before that his expression had been almost universally one of great good humor, but the time seemed to have passed. As he sat in the car he looked anything but amiable, and he saw nobody else that was aboard.

It was not a long ride to Ashby's street. Alighting as near there as possible he was soon at the house. He pulled the bell with a steady hand, and, somewhat to his surprise, was informed that Darius was in. He sent no name, and no message but this:

"Tell him it is a man to see him on important business."

Darius came, and Peter rose.

"I dare say you recognize me, sir?" began the sport.

"Your face is familiar—Ha!"

Darius stopped short, with a sudden change of expression. Surprise was chiefly to be seen there.

"My name," added the Plunger, deliberately, "is Peter Brand."

"I remember you, Mr. Brand."

"I hear you were looking for me to night."

"Indeed?"

"To arrest me!" pursued Peter, grimly.

"May I ask how you learned of this?"

"You surely can ask, but I am not so placed that I can tell you. It may well suffice that I have learned of it. You wanted to see me. Well, sir, I am here!"

Darius Ashby, usually so cool and ready in all emergencies, was embarrassed. He was acute enough to understand that it was not the way of a guilty person to thus make himself seen, and the fact was so potent that he was confused in the presence of the sport.

"Before you arrest me," added Brand, deeply, "I wish to say that I am entirely at your service, and that I invite any and all inquiries on the subject to which I am told you have given your attention and—your suspicions."

"Let me have a word here, sir," quickly spoke Darius. "If you have been informed that I have tried to arrest you, you are wholly wrong. I was searching for you—"

"Accompanied by an officer?"

"True! Yet, my purpose was to question you, not to make an arrest. Of course my errand might have led up to it, had you proved averse to investigation—I am glad to see, sir, that you are not—but I do not act hastily. Do you know why I wished to see you?"

"Yes."

"Do you blame me?"

"It was natural that you should desire to trace the card."

"Can you help me?"

"Unfortunately, I cannot. Every man who has cards printed—and who does not?—parts from them here, there and everywhere. It is so with me. Unless this is a deliberate plot to mix me up with the burglary, the card was one I have had and parted with. I can no more guess who had it than you can guess the number of drops of water in the ocean, sir."

Darius was silent, looking thoughtfully at the floor.

"Do you believe me?" inquired Peter, sharply.

"My dear sir, I have not expressed the least unbelief, and see no reason to do so. I was trying to grasp the facts of the case. Evidently, the man who used the card to light the gas did so without thinking what would be the result. You think he had the card—in what way?"

Quietly Darius studied the face of the caller. If he did not express suspicion he certainly was not credulous enough to be

lieve all he heard, and he wished to have chance to study Mr. Brand.

"He had it in his pocket and used it," replied Peter. "How he got it I don't know. Possibly I am acquainted with him, and then, again, perhaps I am not. I don't know."

"Pardon me, but have you acquaintances who are burglars?"

"Not to my knowledge, but I am a player of the races by trade, and I run up against everything."

"It is decidedly odd."

"If I can do anything to solve this mystery I should be glad to have you let me know. With you it is but a trifle; to me, it is much. I want to clear my name. I am wholly innocent of this matter, and I must establish the fact. I am no thief, sir! I do not rob houses or men. That is sworn to, sir."

"I am glad to hear it."

"Do you believe me?"

"I do."

Darius had been studying his visitor closely, and he did not speak otherwise than truthfully when he made the reply. Unless all signs were deceptive he was talking with one innocent and anxious to have the facts known.

"Mr. Brand," he added, "all is mystery around this matter, thus far, but I absolve you of all blame. Your present manner, your personal appearance and your conduct alike bespeak your freedom from all complicity with the robbery. I believe you innocent. Now, if I may invite your aid, do you think the burglars ordinary desperadoes, or men with motives other than plunder?"

"I do not know, but is not the fact that they ate in your kitchen indicative of the suspicion that they were low-down robbers?"

"It does look so, sir."

Conversation was started on a friendly basis, and the two talked for some time longer, as each was desirous of getting at the truth. The discussion was full and free, and harmony reigned throughout.

No light was gained, however.

Later they spoke of Hiram Inkrod's death, and both stated that there was no new evidence in that case.

"Detective Swanden is still busy," added Darius, "but he is not the man to make new discoveries."

"I have looked into this, myself," replied Brand, "and without result. As far as I can learn there was no reason why anybody should kill Inkrod. Enemies he may have had, but there was nobody, so far as I can learn, who had a grudge against him."

"I would give much to have the mystery solved."

"I hope it may be," answered Peter, quietly. "Let us take hope from the fact that it is not too late. The truth may yet be known."

"You move in the same circle that Inkrod did, do you not?"

"In a certain degree, yes."

"Keep your eyes and ears open, Mr. Brand, and if you can gain a clue I will give you ten thousand dollars."

"I will do all you ask, sir," answered Pete, "but not for the money you offer. That I would not accept under any condition."

"We can speak of that if you gain the clue. Try, for you are situated just right, possibly, to get onto the facts."

The words gave Darius a new thought, and he added, after a pause:

"One thing we have forgotten—how did you learn that I was seeking you, to-day?"

"Pardon me, but that's something I cannot tell. I learned of the fact, but how is my secret."

So saying the sport rose. He was near the door, and, desiring to end the interview, he stepped into the hall. He stood facing Beth.

She was not there as a spy. She had come in secretly, and, desiring to know if Peter had been there, she made an excuse to pass the room where they were. She now had her answer, and she also heard the last words spoken. She and Peter looked each other in the face for a moment; then she bowed and passed on.

"Your secret is safe," he murmured, in a

low tone, and was ready for Darius as the latter followed him to the hall.

"Will you not delay a little?" asked the master of the house.

"Thank you, but my mission is ended and I will go. Should I learn of anything you wish to hear I will see you again. For now, Good-night!"

And Peter went his way.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

PETER HEARS SUGGESTIVE TALK.

It was the race-track of one of the suburban courses, the day after that to which attention has last been called, and a large crowd had been attracted by the announcement that Lamplighter and Tammany would probably meet in the fourth race. Wise bettors doubted this, but they had come along with the novices, drawn by the possibility.

The afternoon opened fair, and the scene was one to remember. The track was in good condition; the grand-stand was filled with female observers; and the betting ring was getting its fill with men hastening there to take risks on the opening event.

From the paddock came the Race-Track Detective. He walked calmly toward the betting ring, ignoring the fair faces in the stand, and intent on nothing more exciting, one would say, than the ordinary things of life. It was so; this was his daily life, and he was never ruffled by common things there.

He entered the crowd in the ring, and made his way to the boards. For awhile he stood scanning the figures, and a smile passed over his face. Something seemed to amuse him.

"There will be hair lost this time," he murmured.

Then he coolly produced fifty dollars and placed it on Prince George to win. This done he fell back a little and continued to watch. Helen Nichols was the favorite in betting, and the mass of the crowd could not enough money to put on her.

Peter had the money, but it had gone on Prince George.

"Aha!"

He breathed the little exclamation as he saw two familiar faces of more than ordinary interest. They were those of Andy Gillen and Luke Harkness, or, as the latter had been introduced to Pete, "Liston."

"So Andy tries his luck?" thought the Plunger. "His place is at a less reputable track; such men as he degrade a decent course."

The thought brought to his mind the question which Merry had asked him. What kind of a crowd frequented, and what sort of a place was the betting-ring?

He looked around more seriously than he had ever done in such a resort before. The ring was about as full as it could be, and the bettors resembled angry bees, as far as activity went. Men were rushing here and there, each in a direction opposite to all others, one would almost say, and they were not at all careful how they went. The wild elbowing and jostling would have led to many a fight almost anywhere else, but here there was a sort of brotherhood which made all things endurable.

It was nothing to Peter; it was the same to the other men; but he wondered what Merry would say if she could see them all.

"Is there anything wrong in it?" he muttered, gravely. "It wouldn't be—I reckon—if there was a surety that all who bet can afford to do so. I'm afraid all can't. Then Merry says it's gambling, and she says gambling is wrong. Is it?"

The inquiry was sincere. Peter was not sure what the answer ought to be. Wrong? Well, he could not see it in that light, but his opinion did not settle it.

His wandering gaze went back to Harkness and Gillen. He saw that the former was looking around in a very secret way, and he suddenly seized the opportunity, while Gillen was talking with a third person, to slip away from his friend.

Curious to see what he was about to do, Pete watched. He soon found out. Watching, himself, until he was sure he was clear of Andy, the ex-slave of the Arabs hurried to one of the stands and handed over several bills.

"Ah! he bets!" thought the detective. "I wonder on what horse?"

Harkness was not so secret with his check but what the Plunger managed to get sight of it.

"Helen Nichols! He goes on the favorite, and he will lose. There is a glamour about the mare for many to-day. It is likely to last until the horses reach the stretch. Then they will be taught to remember that Prince George is a consistent performer."

Harkness hastened to rejoin Gillen, and there was nothing to show that the latter had noticed his absence.

Shortly after, the crowd moved out of the betting-ring, and to the best positions they could find to see the race. Peter walked leisurely to the rail, and stood leaning over it with all the coolness of manner possible.

The bugle sounded, and the horses were brought out. The Plunger eyed them closely during the preliminaries, and his cool manner did not change. The start was protracted, but they were away at last.

Around the track flashed the noble brutes. The first furlongs were soon passed over. At the turn Prince George and Helen Nichols were in the van, and the hopes of the backers of the mare rose high.

It is an old saying that disappointment waits upon the steps of hope. The turn was the fatal point for the mare; she went wide, lost ground, missed her stride and fell back, while Prince George shot on his way.

Helen was among the ruck, but the jockey plied his whip and the gallant mare settled to work once more. One by one she passed the other horses and bore down on Prince George, but the wire was too near for her to show whether she was really capable of overhauling him.

He dashed past the judges' stand with Helen a none-too-dangerous second. She had "place," but it did her backers no good.

Back to the betting-ring went Plunger Pete, and there he cashed his checks with his usual coolness.

In the second race it was easy to pick Don Alonzo for the winner, and Pete was again triumphant, but in the third he met with one of his few reversals. He had picked Rightmore, but the horse was "pocketed" close to the finish, and lost by a close call to the redoubtable Frog Dance.

In the next event Tammany had only gallant Sir Walter to make him run, and when it was over, Plunger Pete took a rest. He had walked to the paddock and started to return by going under the grand-stand, when he again encountered Harkness and Gillen.

"Knaves fall out!" murmured Pete.

This seemed to be true, for the pair were having a wrangle. Curious to know the cause, the sport worked around until he could listen.

It was Andy who was doing the leading.

"You need not depend upon me for anything more," was the angry declaration. "I've been putting up for you on bare promises, and I am tired of it. Your necessary bills I never have been unwilling to pay, but when you come to fool your money—*my* money—away, it is different. Didn't I tell you Helen Nichols would not win?"

"Yes," sullenly admitted Harkness.

"But you had to go and throw your cash away. And when I had a sure 'tip,' too!"

"Well, it's gone."

"So it is, and it's your last from me."

"What's the odds? You told me to wait and put it on Figaro for the third race, and it would have been lost, anyhow, when Frog Dance won so easy."

"If you had lost on my pick I would not have growled."

"Hang it all! you'll get your money back."

"When?"

"When I have it."

"You seem likely to get it!" was the sarcastic comment. "Say, when is your ship coming in?"

"It is sure to come."

"Prove something of it to me. See here, Harkness, it's a queer game for an old stager like me to trust a man off-hand as I have you. Why, when I run afoul of you a veritable tramp might have mistaken you for a comrade."

"I was in hard luck."

"You look it. You were run down at the heel, and the fiends only know what

scrape you had been in. Your clothes were torn, and you had blood spattered all over them, so that—"

"Hush!"

Harkness looked around quickly, apprehensively, but his gaze did not wander in the right direction to take in the listening Plunger.

"Oh! I'm not shouting; don't be afraid. Men here have their own business to attend to. About the blood. Had you been having a fight with a wildcat?"

"It was that of a railroad brakeman," sulkily replied Luke. "I had chance to sell a horse I was possessed of, and then to avoid expense, I tried to get a free ride to New York. I was seen, and had a fight with the trainmen. They got the best of it, but I drew blood before I was conquered."

"A railroad beat, eh?"

"See here, Gillen, don't carry this too far. I owe you, now. Use me decent and you shall be paid, some time."

"Frankly, Harkness, what are your chances of raising the wind?"

"Good!"

"Sure?"

"Do you take me for a liar?"

"I would like to know what your expectations are."

"You shall know in good time."

"Tell me now, if you want to keep in my good graces."

"You are a thug!" cried the ex-slave, angrily! "Like all New Yorkers you have no god but money. When the chink of cash is in your ears you wag your tongue merrily, but a poor devil has no show."

"Haven't you had one with me?"

Harkness hesitated before replying.

"You may be right, Gillen. You have put up well for me, but, just now, you stirred my hot blood by jumping on me as you did. My temper is a seething mass of lava when aroused. You jumped too heavily. I suppose I did wrong to put my money—*your* money, on a loser, but she was the favorite, and when I saw her being backed so strongly, I did think your judgment was not good on the race. Nobody could be more sorry than I; and I've had my lesson. Your judgment was of the best."

Andy brightened up.

"Don't say another word, Harkness; that's all right. Say no more—wait! you may say more. You've not told me why you expect money of your own."

"It's just this way. An old chap has died and left a will which leaves a big sum of money to me and a certain girl, on condition that we marry each other. I am going to do it."

"Is she willing?"

"I shall ask her soon."

"Who is she?"

"I can't tell you."

"Does she live up the Hudson?"

"Why do you think that?"

"You went up there the other day, you know."

"Don't be too curious, Andy, but it will all be right. I am going to win that girl; I'm going to marry her, too."

"Suppose she objects?"

"Then," hissed Harkness, "she dies!"

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE SITUATION GROWS SERIOUS.

LUKE HARKNESS did not look inviting as he made this venomous declaration. His dark, sullen face had lighted with an ugly light, and a timid person might well have thought it prudent to keep away from him. Andy Gillen surveyed him curiously.

"Do you know there is law in this land?" he returned.

"Yes," sulkily answered Harkness.

"You are not on the desert, now, and you want to keep it in mind. Killing is not a safe pastime in New York—unless you have the money to buy your safety, afterward. Are you courting the girl you mention?"

"In a way, yes."

"How is the betting? Are you in it? Are you an odds-on favorite, or a long shot?"

"It will come out all right."

"Why did the old man want you to marry her?"

"So as to keep his money all in one pile."

"I see, and you are agreeable. Is she?"

"It will all come right."

"Evidently, I am not to get into the secret. Well, Harkness, have it so. I will give you chance to work your game, and may it not go bad. When you reach the stretch I hope you'll win under a pull and spread eagle your field. While I am talking like a turfite let me add that I don't want to put up cash to have you play a doubtful horse here. Favorites have not won often this season. Take the voice of the paddock for your guide, rather than the boards of the bookmakers."

"Rely on me, Gillen. I know nothing about this business, as my experience of the day proves. I'll waste no more of your cash, and, Gillen, I may be able to pay up something before long. Bat Feegan has made some propositions to me."

"Look out that Feegan don't get you into Sing Sing. He is a house-breaker among other things, and his lead is dangerous. He got sundry black marks on his face, night before last, which look suspicious. He was wary, but I suspect he tried to make a break and got the worst of it. In fact, he about the same as admitted that he and a pal were whipped on another man's premises."

"I won't risk anything of that sort."

"Don't! Now, we want to see the closing event. Let's go to the betting-ring."

They went, and Plunger Pete was left alone. He did not stir for some time, but stood in a thoughtful attitude.

"My friend Liston, whose real name seems to be Harkness, is a plotter of dark dye, I should say," was his mental comment. "I wonder what he is driving at? He, marry a co-heiress? Well, she will be a fool if she takes him."

The steady flow of men toward the ring reminded Peter that his own business was there. He went, and found the talent going in strong on Michael. He did not like the choice, so he put fifty dollars on Beansey, and went out just as the bugle sounded. Once more he was a winner, for the game son of Iroquois beat Michael and Tigress in the rush to the wire, and then the day's sport was over.

Pete took the homeward train, and saw no more of Gillen and Harkness. He was destined to hear from them before he slept that night.

It was past six o'clock when he reached home, and he had supper first of all. This done he sat down to smoke and read, according to his plan, but the occasion developed into an era of deep thought. The minutes passed on and found him still engaged thus, and he only aroused when, at nine, he was interrupted by the arrival of Silky Shaw.

The star of the variety stage did not seem to be in his usual high spirits, and he was not long in making the cause known.

"Say, Pete," he broke forth, "what sort of a dame is that Beth Ashby, anyhow?"

The detective frowned slightly.

"A fine woman!" he answered, after a pause, shortly.

"And a friend of yours?"

"Ye-es."

"Then you want to help her."

"Why?"

"She's in need of it. To come right to the point, Andy Gillen is trying to do her harm, and he has Bat Feegan in his tow. You know Andy, and you may have seen Feegan."

"I have. What is up?"

"They are engineering a blackmailing dodge against her."

"How do you know this?"

"Got on to it by accident. You see, Andy thinks he's a masher, and he plays the 'Johnny' game at the theater doors now and then. He got in with an actress named Mousey Marl, and he was of the opinion that she was as bad as he was. He went to her and unfolded a plot he had hatched up for blackmailing Miss Ashby—I don't know just what it was to be, but it needed himself, Mousey and a third party, and Feegan was to be the third—and he asked her to give her attention and share the profits. He slipped a cog there, for Mousey ain't a shyster by a large majority. She heard the plan, and told him she would think it over and let him have an answer later on. She never meant for a moment to help, and she came right to me with the story. She

had never heard of Miss Ashby before, but I had, and the story hit me hard. See?"

"Yes."

"Is Miss Ashby to be victimized thus?"

"I hope not."

"She won't be, even if I have to chip in alone!" declared Silky, "but as you know her it occurred to me that you were the boy to balk the gang. Think of it!—such a reptile as Andy to blackmail a clipper craft like Beth!"

It was not news to the detective, but it showed him that Gillen was still active, and bent on carrying out his scheme.

"You take it coolly," added Silky, in disappointment.

"I do not. I was thinking."

"Will you act, too?"

"Yes."

"Bravo for you, old man!"

"I will see Gillen."

"Better see the girl, first—I mean, Beth."

"Do you think so?"

"Sure!"

"Why?"

"To put her on her guard, and ask her advice, perhaps. If we beat him we want to act with judgment."

"You may be right."

"I know I am."

Peter did not know anything of the sort. He was practical, and, being aware of what had already occurred in the scheme to blackmail Beth, he felt that the only good way was for him to see Gillen, tell him that his plans were fully known, and give the fellow to understand clearly that he must drop his plot or get into trouble with the law.

Yet, the detective listened to Silky's suggestion. See Beth? The old glamour was not gone, and he caught at the idea which would give him excuse to seek her presence. Why should he seek her? He knew of no good reason, yet he listened to Silky's plan without remonstrance.

And Silky, blissfully innocent of his own ignorance, went on to give more reasons until Pete was convinced—that he had good excuse to call on Beth.

They settled it that way, and when the boy left it was with the Plunger's promise to carry out the course agreed upon.

The sport did not sleep the best that night. He had much to think about, and, somehow, his blood was in a feverish state. What if he could so win Beth's gratitude that she would abate her enmity to him? What if he could recover her regard?

It was a wild hope, and he knew it, but it did not leave him.

When he awoke in the morning he had the plan still in mind, and he prepared for it. According to Silky's notion he was to call openly at Ashby's, for Silky did not know of any reason why he should not proceed thus. Peter did know of a reason, and in place of so open a campaign he had studied up another by which he hoped to gain audience with Beth.

After breakfast he left the house.

He had exhausted his supply of cigars, so he stopped, a block away, to replenish the stock. The particular cigar-store he saw fit to patronize was a partial partition of a saloon, and when Peter walked in he was seen by some one in the saloon who at once came out of the door which united the two parts.

This person was Andy Gillen.

The latter looked decidedly sour, and he did not lose the expression as he addressed the Plunger.

"Brand," he spoke, "I want to see you!"

There was that in the assertion which told Pete that trouble was afoot, but he did not let that worry him in the least.

"Drive ahead!" he returned, coolly.

"Come inside."

Andy turned, and Pete followed in silence. As far as this went it might indicate much or nothing, for, though never friends, they had had a sort of acquaintance for a good many years; but when once in the saloon the sport was shown that the occasion was not to be amicable.

The was a wide space in front of and beyond the bar, and to the remote end Andy led the way. Then he turned once more, hostility in every look and motion.

"Brand," he continued, "I want to know why you are meddling with my affairs. I want a settlement with you!"

CHAPTER XXX.

ANDY'S THREAT.

THE Race Track Detective remained as calm as if the conversation had been opened in a spirit of friendliness.

"I was not aware that there was anything between us that needed settling," he answered, "but if there is I shall be pleased to hear from you."

"I think I shall be able to convince you there is something," retorted Andy, quickly.

"Brand, I want to know why you are meddling with my affairs?"

"Am I doing so?" asked the Plunger, mildly.

"You are, and if you don't stop it you will get your head cracked open. Understand?"

"Your words are surely plain enough, Mr. Gillen. More than that, they smack of the Bowery so much as to be very picturesque—"

"I am not here to joke."

"Nor am I aware that anybody has made a joke."

"I am fully in earnest. Do you remember that you came between me and Miss Ashby on a certain occasion?"

"When you represented yourself as a detective and, as such, tried to blackmail her. Yes; I remember it well."

"Why did you interfere? What business was it of yours?"

"Simply that I did not intend to see such knavery succeed."

"Was it any of your business, I say?"

"From your point of view, perhaps not."

"Then why need you interfere? The excuse you have just given will not go. What are you that you should read any man a lesson on good manners? A sport, a man about town, a player of the races. That's what you are, and the law-and-order league would not touch you with a ten foot pole. If any body is more despised by decent people, and more generally sat down on, I would like to know who it is."

"You are quite eloquent, but I don't see that you touch the point at issue. I am not here to defend my reputation, and if you expect it you will get left."

"I was only trying to show that your claim of being so mighty good, yourself, was all bosh. You are a sharper, Brand, and nothing more. You have your games to play, and I have mine. What business, I say, had you to interfere with me?"

"You object, do you?"

"You can bet your life I do. You came into the game like a sneak and blocked me, and that is not all you have done. I happen to know you called at the Ashby house on Friday. Went to get into their good graces and work your own plots, didn't you?"

Andrew Gillen had worked himself to a higher pitch of fury each moment, and he had gone so high that he looked ready to explode. His red face was redder than ever with his passion, and he glared upon Peter as if about to leap upon him bodily.

The Plunger, however, was perfectly cool.

"This is wasted talk," he calmly responded. "You need not discuss what I have done, and I will not criticise you. Beyond the fact that I did not intend to let you victimize the young woman you have mentioned I have no comment to make."

"You are still working against me."

"What of it?"

"Just this: If you don't stop I will do you up!"

"More of the picturesque Bowery. You seem to revel in the talk which the thug thrives on, too. Not to exhaust the Bowery vocabulary let me say right at the start that, though I have no quarrel with you, you are welcome to try your sanguinary purpose whenever you feel like it. You don't scare me, Andy, a little bit."

In the face of Gillen's hot words this reply was remarkable. Nothing could exceed the mildness and matter-of-fact coolness of the Plunger. It made it all the worse for Andy, for an angry man does not like his opponent to be calm.

"Scare you!" he hissed; "that ain't what I want to do. I'll do you up—whip you within an inch of your life—if you don't let me alone. Is that plain?"

"Yes."

"More than that, if you force me to it I'll use a revolver."

"All right."

"See here," gasped Gillen, "do you think I am joking?"

"No."

"I am not; I mean all I say; and your life is not worth a straw if you meddle more with my affairs. I'll finish you off. Do you hear?"

"Yes," coolly answered Peter. "By the way, I am in a hurry. Are you done talking?"

Andy stared, speechless. At last words came and he exclaimed:

"By my life! either you are a rank fool or the nerviest man I ever knew."

"You don't seem to understand," seriously replied the Plunger. "It is like this: I hold that every man has a right to his own way, and, when you say you will kill me if I don't do thus and so, I can't conscientiously object if you carry out your plan, or try to. Of course I should not stand up and get the ax like an ox in the shambles. Should you try to 'do me up,' as you call it, I shall very likely show my teeth. Now, I think we fully understand, and as I have no time for delay, I will go. Good-morning!"

He walked rapidly away, but Gillen was too much dumfounded to oppose his departure.

It was some minutes before Andy fairly recovered from his dazed feeling. When he did he was still astonished.

"That's a new sort of a man, by Jove! Never run up against one just like him before. Cool as an ice-berg—or weak of mind. Which? I'll be shot if I know," admitted the sharper, "but if I get a foul of him it won't matter much. Let me see one more sign that he is meddling, and I'll fix him!"

There was some consolation in the threat, but as Gillen moved toward the bar, he was conscious of a feeling of deep disappointment that he had made so little visible impression on the Plunger.

Peter went northward and was soon near the Ashby residence. In a telegraph office he sat down and wrote this note:

MISS ASHBY:—It is to your interest that I see you as soon as possible. Will you tell me how it can be done?"

To this he signed his name, and then sent the message in a sealed envelope. The reply came back sooner than was to be expected, and it gave him pleasure. It was even more brief than his own communication, being limited to one line:

"Come here at once."

He went, and was received in the Ashby parlor with a degree of politeness she had not accorded him for many months. Hope was not yet dead in his mind, but he did not let it interfere with his conduct. Putting his own interests entirely out of the question he told her of Andy Gillen and his determined efforts to extort blackmail.

Beth listened closely, but with few comments.

"He will not succeed," she declared, when he was done. "I shall pay no more attention to Mr. Gillen. I know him as he is, and his pretense of being a detective will avail him nothing in the future. It seems to me you have the most to fear from him."

"I do not care for his angry words. He is at liberty to do what he pleases."

"I am very grateful to you for warning me, Mr. Brand."

"I felt that it ought to be done," quietly replied Peter.

Beth was silent for a few moments; then she remarked with some embarrassment:

"You have several times proved your good will to me, of late, and that, too, in the face of great opposition from me. I feel that I have been hasty in the past in judging you, and I hope that you will let me apologize now. But, Mr. Brand, there was much of disappointment in the past—when we knew each other."

"I suppose so," admitted Peter, slowly, for he had seen nothing in her manner, despite the fact that her words had grown kindly, to give rise to hope.

"I do not know but I was more blame-worthy than you, then," she went on. "There was hasty action. My present knowledge of the world shows me that any man would be guilty of it, but it is left to

women to be more thoughtful. I was not thoughtful, and the conditions followed. Precipitate action brought us to trouble. When we knew each other fully it was too late to retreat."

"I did not want to," mildly asserted Peter.

"You see now that we were wrong, don't you?"

"No."

"Consider the differences in our tastes, rearing, associations and opinions."

"Yes," indirectly admitted the Plunger, sighing.

"We were never intended for the step we took."

"It seems not."

"You know how it affected me, even with the glamour of that day upon me, when I knew all. You were addicted to racing, to betting on races, and your associations were of the race course. You know what I thought of it."

"You told me."

"Believe me, my motive is not unkind when I remind you that my pleasures were in the society I had been accustomed to, and in society generally, and the world I knew. Had you interest in that life?"

"Not a bit!" exclaimed Peter, with the first sign of animation.

"And I had none in horse-racing, betting, or life in your sphere."

"You told me," repeated Peter.

"Could two persons be more widely different in birth, training and habits?"

"No."

"Then do you not see that we were never intended to move together along life's path?"

"It does look so," agreed he, sighing.

Beth had spoken very kindly, for she had seen that she was dealing with a man sincere in all ways when he asserted his friendly regard for her, and the bitterness of the past was dispelled. She had been doing a good deal of thinking, and this talk was the result of it.

"Then," she added, "don't you think we had better give up everything?"

"I reckon we have done so," duly responded he. "I have."

"If you are sincere in your claims of good will, and I believe you are, we may still be friends."

"I am your friend; I am!" he declared.

"I think you are."

"You do? You do? Then a load is lifted from my heart!"

The gloomy expression of face vanished, and the Plunger looked like a different man. Happiness was pictured on his broad face, and he seemed hardly able to contain himself.

"But," Beth continued, "we can be no more."

The light went out. Peter was silent for a moment, and then he answered bravely:

"I see; you told me so before. Well, you will find me true to all I've said. I won't ever do you harm, and I won't put myself in your way at all. No, but all that man can do I'll do for you!"

CHAPTER XXXI.

LUKE HARKNESS.

BETH changed expression quickly. The dog-like fidelity and patience of this man moved her. In the past she had thought him her foe, and a man not to be considered with kindness in any way, and the unfortunate situation in which she found herself had betrayed her into bitterness, even to unwomanly harshness. Now, she was enlightened, and mingled with regret for her own conduct was sincere feeling for him.

"Don't you see it is best we should keep apart?" she inquired, after a pause.

"Yes, I do," the detective agreed; "I do, and I'll help you. As you say, we were never cut out to go together. I would as soon spend my time in Sing Sing as to take part in your fashionable life, and I know you look with loathing on my business. Yes; you are right. Our tastes are too widely different for us to think of making up what we lost. We agree on that, so we will only be friends. I wish I could undo the past."

It was a sudden thought, and the gravity of his face told how much it was to him. Beth looked startled.

"Don't let us speak of that now," she hastily replied.

"We will not, and I will go now. But let me say again, look out for Andy Gillen! Yes, and look out for all men you don't know. He has heelers he might send to do you mischief—Bat Feegan, Shiner Duff, Harkness and the rest."

"Harkness!" echoed Beth.

"Yes."

"Not Luke Harkness?"

"Yes; that's his name. Do you know him? But it can't be you know him very well."

"Is he with Gillen?"

"Yes. He's out of money and out of luck, and Gillen is helping him keep afloat—supplies him with money. I don't know how true it is, but Harkness asserts that there is hope of his paying up later on. He claims that some rich man has made a will by which he—Harkness—will be very rich on condition that he marries a certain young woman. That's the terms of the will; they must marry, and then the money will go to them."

"Does Harkness claim that?"

"Yes."

"Why, the lady in the case is my sister-in-law, but his hopes ended long ago. She is my brother's wife. If Harkness claims that he has hope still left he is deceiving Gillen."

"Why shouldn't he? It's a den of deceivers. But is it really Mrs. Ashby?"

"Yes," Beth replied; and she added a brief description of the facts.

She reiterated that Harkness was using a false lever to get Gillen's aid, and Peter took the same view of the matter. He learned more of affairs at the Ashby house than he had known before, and found it of interest, though he said but little.

Shortly after he went his way. Thus far they had not been seen by Darius and his wife, as far as was known, and he did not wish that it should be so.

Leaving the house he rode down-town. He went in deep thought. For a long while his attention was on his own affairs, and what Beth had said to him, but his mind finally turned to other subjects. He found it hard to understand Luke Harkness.

"He seemed to be in dead earnest when he talked with Gillen. His manner wasn't the manner of one who is playing a part. I never saw a man more serious, and more fiercely in earnest in appearance. Can it be he is merely fooling Andy to get a living for awhile? Or has he still hope of gaining the Lorrester money? He has no chance as long as Darius Ashby lives. It would be different if Darius was dead."

The detective paused and muttered:

"If Darius was dead!"

The thought appeared to have a strange influence over the speaker.

So deeply did he meditate on the point that when he left the train it was with the unconsciousness of one who treads familiar ways and can tread them with his mind wholly absorbed. He did not waken from this mood until, on the street, he almost ran upon a man. Coming back to real life, he looked and saw—Luke Harkness.

"Hallo!" he exclaimed.

The ex-slave of the Arabs stopped and fixed his gaze on the sport. Peter was at once conscious that there had been a misfortune in Luke's affairs. It was visible in the gash which showed on his head, but still more so in his ugly and unhappy expression.

"So it's you," he muttered, in a surly voice.

"It is, sure. Have you been fighting a tiger?"

Harkness put his hand to the gash.

"If I knew the man who did that, I would kill him!" he hissed.

"Don't you know?"

"No; he was a stranger. He struck me a coward's blow when I was not looking. It stunned me, and when I recovered, he was gone."

"You want to see to it. Better go to a hospital, or a doctor."

"To the fiends with both!" growled the ex-slave.

"You are liable to have serious trouble with that hurt."

"So is the fellow who did it!" snarled Harkness. "He jostled me; I reproved him

—possibly I used hot words; I guess I did—and then he struck me like a coward. Let him beware if I meet him!"

The detective saw that it was merely an ordinary quarrel, as far as the beginning went, but he added another word of caution, and advised the seeing of a doctor at once.

"What do I care for it?" returned Luke. "I have seen many a worse hurt, and been cured by Nature. Why, I could show you scars all over my person. The Arabs used to give me blows whenever they saw fit, and the blood flowed unchecked, and the hurt went undressed. Man, you who live in this section do not know what suffering is. You should be a slave of the Arabs!"

"Hard lines, was it?"

Luke's eyes glittered wildly.

"Hard! It was Inferno!"

"If your mind soared to revenge, you should have got square with them."

"Ha! ha! Get square! Didn't I? Ha! ha! didn't I?"

"So you did, eh?"

Harkness grasped his companion's arm.

"Listen!" he grated. "I tell people that I stole away from them one night when they were asleep. So I did, but there was no need of making my steps soft or furtive. Get square? Ha! ha! If I didn't square the debt you can take me back. Yes, you can take me back, but only the bones of the Arabs would you find. Listen! I put poison in the water, and every man drank. Do you want to know more?"

Peter did not. He shivered. He had no sympathy for barbarians who had misused a captive through many months, but the way in which the ex-slave told of his revenge was enough to chill Peter's blood.

Besides all the rest, he at that moment, oddly enough, reminded Pete of the garrotor seen one night on the street, and thus furnished food for new thought; but other things were more pressing then.

"I reckon you are capable of avenging your own wrongs," he commented, for the sake of saying something.

"I have been so far."

"I trust that you will have no more to avenge."

Darker the face of the wanderer seemed to grow.

"He who wrongs me must suffer!" was the deep reply. "There have been more than the Arabs, and more than they shall feel the weight of my hand. Why, the Arabs were angels to some I know, but they shall follow the Arabs. Their day will come!"

The detective thought of what he had been told about Luke's disappointment at the Ashby house, and it grew more clear that he was a dangerous man.

"Don't try it in this country," he advised. "We give men to the electric chair here, you know."

"A thousand chairs of death will not stop me! I will have revenge— Ha ha! I am only joking, of course."

Luke had stopped, hesitated, and then broken off so suddenly that it was clear that prudence had returned to him. He brushed his hands across his face and added:

"When I get to thinking of the Arabs it makes me nearly wild, but those days are past and I hope for a peaceful life now. Yes, yes!"

Peter was not deceived by the new turn of affairs, but he did not see fit to express doubt.

Before much more could be said, footsteps sounded and a new actor put in an appearance. It was none other than Swanden, the detective. He nodded shortly to Harkness.

"Where have you been?" he curtly demanded. "I have had a dickens of a hunt for you. Why didn't you keep your engagement?"

Luke looked disturbed and annoyed, and it was plain that he did not regard the meeting with pleasure. He hesitated, and then answered peevishly:

"I'm not to blame. I have a wound here that works me all up. My head is wrong. Yes, and I forgot all about my engagement with you."

"I shall have to excuse you, then. Are you ready for the work?"

Again Luke hesitated, then he suddenly responded:

"Yes."

Swanden looked at Peter.

"Is this a friend of yours?"

"Yes."

"Good! Will you oblige me by keeping us company, sir? I am going to see and arrest a dangerous man, and your help may be of value. Will you come?"

He now addressed Peter, and the latter bluntly inquired:

"Who is the man?"

"We do not know his name, but it can be learned later. He is one who has been heard by your friend here to utter suspicious words, and I am going to take him into custody, as it may help a case I have in hand."

Peter regarded Harkness closely, and there was that in the man's expression which decided the sport. Plainly there was something beneath the surface, and he wished to learn what it was.

"I'll go," he decided.

"Lead on!" Swanden added, to Luke.

The ex-slave obeyed, but it was done with the uncertain manner of one who does not feel sure of his position, if Brand read him aright. This fact did not seem to impress Swanden, however.

Harkness conducted his companions along for two blocks, and then abruptly entered a low-class hotel which was but little more than a lodging-house. Up to the upper hall he led the way, and paused near a certain door.

"That's the place," he said, pointing.

Swanden drew out a pair of handcuffs, and looked at Peter.

"Are you armed?" he asked.

"Yes, I have a revolver."

"Draw it, and see to the mechanism. There may be no fight, but we want to be on the safe side."

Brand was fully committed to the venture, and wanted to see it through. He produced the weapon, and gave it the requested attention.

"Now," added Swanden, to the guide, "open the door."

The ex-slave seemed anything but content. His uneasy eyes rolled in a survey of everything but matters of importance, and he only directed his attention to Swanden when his hand was on the knob of the door. The country officer thought he saw timidity in this, and his theory received new strength.

"Be cautious!" warned Luke. "Detective though you are, the desperate wretch inside will shoot you if he can!"

"I will risk it," replied Swanden, steadily. "Lead on!"

Peter was growing somewhat excited over this campaign in the dark, and he pressed close after when the door swung back. Like the others he saw only an empty room.

"What's this?" growled Swanden.

"He must have skipped," muttered Harkness.

"And we are too late?"

"Yes."

Only disappointment was pictured on the detective's face, but Peter was not deceived. He felt positive that Luke had not expected to find any one present.

"What are we to do now?" asked Swanden, irritably.

"I advise that you get out quick," replied the guide. "You must not be seen around here. Go, and if he comes in, I will send you word at once. Go, before any of his friends see you in this room."

"Your idea is correct, and it shall be done. When he shows up, send for me at this address."

The speaker thrust a card into Luke's hand, and then hurried out of the hall, forgetting the sport. The latter stood still and eyed Luke until the latter met his gaze and moved uneasily.

"So you are still here?" he growled.

"Where else should I be?" retorted Peter. "I wanted to see the end of your deceit."

"My deceit?"

"Yes. You have played on the detective's credulity."

"You are right," suddenly agreed Harkness. "It's all the result of this cursed wound. I met Swanden and told him I had heard of a certain man—a stranger—talk of a case Swanden is on. I agreed to show him to Swanden. Fool that I was!—it was the fever in my veins. I knew of no such man. Once away from the detective I

forgot all about it, but he stumbled on me in the street, as you have seen. I had to do something, so I took him to this room, knowing the occupant would be out. It was all a deceit, but due to my fevered mind. I must see no more of Swanden. Come, let us leave the hotel."

They went, and, once on the sidewalk, Luke hastily left the sport. Brand gazed after him sharply.

"I think I see into this. Swanden is hot on the trail of Ashby, and when he happened to see Luke, the first time, the latter did simply talk without reason. But it shows how eager the detective is. As for Mr. Harkness—well, I must think concerning him. A dangerous person! So he has revenge to seek. Upon whom? He has the spirit to strike those who deprived him of the Lorrester money, if he takes the notion."

Gravely Peter shook his head.

"Here is detective work for me. With the wound he has he is hardly responsible. Ashby will do well to look out for him, and I'll send a note of warning to that effect. Dangerous Harkness! He haunts Ashby's too much. I must investigate and watch the ex-slave!"

CHAPTER XXXII.

THE MASK FALLS DOWN.

FROM the second floor Catholine descended to the main hall of the Ashby residence. It was evening, and the gas shed a brilliant light through the place. Darius had gone out with Beth, and Mrs. Ashby had the house to herself as far as the family went.

On the table was a letter. She picked it up. It was addressed to Darius, and she put it down after a brief glance. She would, perhaps, have saved herself a good deal of trouble by opening the latter.

It was from Peter Brand, and was an anonymous warning against the ex-slave of the Arabs. It contained notice of the threats Harkness had used when talking with Gillen, when he told him of the revenue he expected from the will of the rich man. These words, repeated to the Ashbys, would have had all the significance which Peter believed they possessed.

The letter was there, but it passed unheeded.

Catholine entered the parlor, there to await Darius's return. But ten minutes had passed when she heard the door-bell ring. She gave it but passing notice until the parlor door opened. A servant was there.

"A gentleman to see you, Mrs. Ashby," announced the maid.

"What name?"

Luke Harkness appeared beside the servant.

"Pardon me," he said, with all the mildness imaginable, "but I had no card, so I could send no name."

"Oh! is it you, Mr. Harkness?"

"As you see. I was passing, so I called for a moment."

Catholine was sorry to see him, for all of his air of meekness since the first day of his return had not made him in favor with her, but his present course, and the bait of an alleged short call, made her feel compelled to see him for awhile.

She asked him to sit down, and the servant went away.

Not until they were placed face to face did she notice that there had been any change in the man, but it was evident then. First of all the cut on his cheek drew her attention, and its ugly appearance was such that she looked so closely that he could not fail to see it.

He touched the hurt.

"I thought when I came from the land of the Arabs that I was done with wounds," he remarked, lightly, "but it seems not. This, however, was the result of a stick falling from a building where men were doing carpenter work. It fell point on, and hit me as you see."

"That was unfortunate."

"I do not mind it, only it makes a bad look."

Catholine mentally agreed with him, and as she studied his face anew she found it generally repulsive. He had never been passable in her eyes, but the passion of hatred and revenge, which he had been harboring

of late, had marked lines in his skin which did not improve him. Catholine felt that she was regarding a man who was all that was undesirable in men, and she was sorry she was with him.

Luke, on his part, was trying to be calm, but he found it hard. He was with the woman who he hoped would yet bring him wealth, and he was obliged to be cool. Hard, indeed, was the struggle, for he wanted to urge his hopes—wild as the plan would have been, he wished to appeal to her for pity, help and favor.

He was with her—with the woman upon whom his future depended—but a human life was between them. Hard was it to be calm.

"Will Demonio never kill him?" thought the wanderer. "Has he tamed the mad horse, and made a creature of the fierce temper of the fiend of the equine race?"

Hot grew Luke's blood; harder grew the struggle for self-possession.

"Will Demonio never kill him?" wondered he, again.

Catholine stirred uneasily under that gaze. She broke an awkward pause.

"Have you succeeded in locating in business yet, Mr. Harkness?" she inquired.

"Yes," he replied.

"May I ask in what line?"

"Cashier in a bank," he returned, giving the first explanation which occurred to him.

"That must be a good position."

"Good!" he echoed, with sudden bitterness. "Good, when I might be reveling in the Lorrester money?"

"Pray do not speak of that. It belongs to an era of the past."

Luke had lost his self-control.

"It may not be too late!" he cried, impetuously. "Suppose something should happen! Why couldn't the conditions of the will be fulfilled then?—filled for you and me!"

"I do not want the Lorrester money," exclaimed Catholine, frightened alike by his words and looks. "I wish you had it all."

"How can I get it without your help?" was the swift reply.

"I don't see how I can help you."

"There is a way."

"I know of none."

"If you—"

Fierce, betraying words were on Luke's lips, but a slight return of caution checked him. He remembered Demonio. If the horse did his appointed work there must be nothing to cast a shadow.

"You don't know what it was to me to lose the money," Harkness proceeded, more prudently. "When it was lost you had the fortune which came to you with your marriage; the fortune which was Ashby's outright. What did I have?"

"You cannot blame me for the loss."

It was an unlucky speech. Luke's eyes flamed anew.

"Who is to blame, then?" he hotly demanded. "All would have been well if you had carried out Guerdon Lorrester's wishes."

"His wishes were not mine, sir."

"No, and you deliberately reduced me to poverty."

"Mr. Harkness, why need we speak of this? It is a thing of the past. It was duly considered then, and now it is only a memory."

"A vivid memory, I do assure you, Catholine, is all lost? Listen to me!" cried Luke, with fierce energy. "Think what my life has been! Long months I lingered in the hands of the Arabs, a miserable captive, but I was kept alive by thoughts of you; by thoughts of the Lorrester money. It was much, all; it was life, reason and hope. But for that I should have died, but I lived because I was mad to return to you! To you!—do you hear me?—to you! Oh! Catholine, sweet star of my life! do not turn from me! I love you! I love you! and though—

Click!

The front door opened. Darius Ashby stood there.

Strange words he had heard, for the last of the mad torrent had floated to his ears; strange things he saw now. Catholine, thoroughly alarmed, at last, had risen, but Harkness was before her, his hands clasped to her, and his manner that of a lover—a mad, impetuous suitor, but a lover still.

It was this which Ashby saw.

Catholine uttered a cry of mingled terror and relief.

"Oh! Darius, Darius!" she panted.

Ashby saw. Other men in that situation might possibly have asked for some explanation before acting as a wife could wish, but his faith in Catholine was unwavering. He was not moved with jealousy or doubt.

Stern became his face, but his calmness was marked as he turned upon the visitor.

"Mr. Harkness," he spoke, with dignity, "you forget yourself!"

"What do I forget?" hotly retorted Luke.

"That yonder lady is my wife."

"You stole her from me!—you stole her, but the end is not yet. She is yours now, but I will live to claim her when you are dead!"

"I am glad you speak plainly, sir, for I now know that I have been throwing sympathy away on you. We understand each other, at last, and I have no more to say to you. Catholine, has there been any unpardonable offense offered to you?"

"No," replied the frightened woman.

"Then we will once more overlook the acts of a hasty nature, but we will not give our time, attention or company to one who is destitute of honor. Mr. Harkness, we will dispense with your presence. Yonder is the door!"

"You order me out?" hissed Luke.

"I do."

"Ordered out like a dog?"

"The comparison is of your own choosing."

"Robbed of my inheritance," breathed Luke, huskily, "and now deemed unworthy of even a look. Ordered out!"

"We need not discuss the point after what has occurred. Go!"

Darius was as cool as ice, itself, and not the least sign of emotion betrayed itself, but he was like a rock. All the iron firmness of his strong nature was at the front. This but added fuel to Harkness's maddened mood.

"I have one word to say first," he retorted, "and this is the argument!"

From his pocket he jerked a revolver.

"Darius, oh! Darius!" cried Catholine, in terror.

She need not have held the fear. Ashby was duly alive to the possibilities from the first, and he did not let the revolver cut any figure. Even as the weapon clicked he caught Harkness in a resistless hold. The revolver was wrested away, and Luke was hurried to the door and thrust out without ceremony. He had resisted to the best of his ability, but he had to deal with one his superior in strength, and he might as well have yielded tamely.

Once on the stoop he was shoved back and the door partially closed.

"Go, now!" ordered Darius. "I give you warning that if you make any disturbance here an officer will be summoned and you will be locked up. Remember that warning!"

Luke heard it, but he was not subdued. He made a forward movement to attack his opponent, but the door closed with a bang and he was shut out. Only the blank wood remained to furnish food for his vision.

His blood was hotter than ever, and the impulse was strong to get something of suitable nature and smash the door in, but the sense of prudence had not wholly deserted him.

"If I do it I lose my last chance," he thought. "They will have me locked up, and I shall be helpless. No; I will surrender for now—for now, but I shall be heard from again. I live only for revenge. If Demonio does not act speedily I will take the work off his hands!"

So thinking the ex-slave moved down the street.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

THE WORK OF A VILLAIN.

On the same evening that Luke made his call at the Ashby house Peter Brand was alone in his room. Grave subjects seemed to occupy his time, and he studied on something long and carefully.

"I've looked it all over," he murmured, at last, "and if I succeed as a detective I think it must be on this theory. I can see no other way. And yet, there is the absence of a definite purpose, unless the theory of mis-

take is adopted. If it is that, how am I to prove it? How can I prove it, anyhow? Disordered minds often tell much. There was cause for the deceit practiced on Swanden. But how prove it?"

A rap sounded at the door. He bade the applicant enter, and a messenger appeared.

"Mr. Brand?" was the question.

"Yes."

"Note for you, sir."

It was handed over, and Peter quickly broke the seal. He read as follows:

"Come to my room immediately. There is trouble here. SILKY SHAW."

It was enough to call Peter at any time, and he rose and hurried away. It was not a long walk to the house where his young friends lived, and he was soon at the door; the room was deserted.

"All out? Well, that's queer, after the message, but perhaps—"

He stopped short. Footsteps sounded close at hand, and Silky came up the stairs two steps at a time. His face brightened at sight of the Plunger, and he hurriedly exclaimed:

"Thank Providence you have come!"

"What is up?" inquired Peter.

"Merry is abducted!"

"What?"

"Fact. Andy Gillen has lured her away, and nobody knows what trouble she is in now."

"Silky, you don't mean it—you surely don't!" cried the sport, excitedly. "Tell me you are joking."

"I wish I was, but I'm not. Listen to me, for we must lose no time. I had been out. I came home, and found Merry absent. Of course that did not trouble me at first, but pretty soon a man put in an appearance. He was as disreputable-looking a fellow as I ever saw, but he had a story to tell.

"His name was Shiner Duff, and he was an ally of Gillen and Bat Feegan. He told me that Gillen had planned to steal Merry, to be revenged on you. He got Bat and Shiner to help him, but it seems he concluded to ship Shiner. At any rate he gave him the shake, and Shiner was left out of it wholly."

"This made the tough angry, and he went wild over the thought that he was to lose, through what he regarded as treachery, the share of the money he had been promised by Gillen.

"It's an old saying that there is honor among thieves. Shiner did not think of it, I guess. He came right here and gave the whole snap away."

"Where is he?" interrupted Peter, quickly.

"Gone to watch at a certain point where he thinks he will get clue to them. You see, he was not told where she was to be concealed, but he hopes to get the clue now. I have promised him so much money to help us that I reckon we need not doubt his loyalty to us."

"Stolen Merry!" cried the Plunger. "My Heaven! how could mortal man sink so low!"

"Well, he's done it."

"Why," almost shouted Peter, "I will strangle him when we meet!"

"Do it, old man, and I'll back you up!" declared Silky, who well knew that the fierce threat rose from Pete's honest indignation.

"The scoundrel has taken the wrong way to get square, and he will learn it!" added the usually cool sport, impetuously.

"Hark!"

"What?"

"Steps on the stairs. It may be Shiner returning."

It was, and the man bounded in almost out of breath wholly.

"What news?" demanded Silky. "Say it quick!"

"I have the clue," panted Shiner. "Come with me an' we will nab them in the act. See?"

"Where is it?"

"Ma'am Chowder's opium joint. No wonder et was there, fer Andy is in with the gang."

"I know the place," added Silky, hurriedly, "though I never hit the pipe there or elsewhere. Come on, and if the lead is good we'll win the round."

Peter was still confused by the case, and he had no idea of the intricacies of the matter, or whether their way was best, but he had faith in Silky, and the latter appeared very confident.

More was learned from Shiner as he hastened along the street. There had been more than revenge in Gillen's course, it seemed; he had once admired Merry and tried to win her regard, but she had been wise enough to reject his friendship, and he was now seeking to secure by violence what he could not win otherwise.

This was the sort of a man they had to hunt.

He learned, too, that the den of "Ma'am Chowder" was near the North River, and to this place he was quickly conducted by the other two. It proved to be a dismal-looking place on the exterior, but Shiner pictured it as a scene of glory within.

A dim light in an upper window was the only sign of life.

"We had better call in a policeman," remarked Peter.

"No!" asserted Silky. "Ain't we good for them? Well, I should remark so!"

No officer was near, and the Plunger did not dispute the point.

Duff had never had the means or the inclination to patronize the opium den, but he knew all about it, as he had conducted many a weak-minded citizen there in the past; and he knocked at the door in a peculiar way. It was opened promptly, and a woman stood on the other side.

"Two guests," quoth Duff, readily.

It was enough, and they were allowed to enter, but, once within the lair, the impatience of the variety performer could brook no delay. He seized the woman by the arm.

"Old lady!" he exclaimed, "trot out the prisoner!"

"Eh? What prisoner?"

"The one Andy Gillen has brought here."

"I don't know him, and there has been nobody brought here," was the stout reply.

"That's a lie!" retorted Shiner. "I seen it done. We want the gal, an' ef she ain't toddled out we will hev this ark pulled in a brace o' shakes, by gum! D'ye hear, old woman?"

"There ain't nobody here!"

The reply was stubborn enough, and it was clear that they were not progressing as was to be wished. Plunger Pete had grown impatient over the slow work of his aids. He put in his word sternly.

"Woman, I am a policeman," he asserted, "and I don't think you want to go to the station with me. There is no disposition to do you harm if you come to terms, but if you are stubborn, I shall arrest you and give you the full measure of the law."

She began to whimper.

"I ain't done nothin'."

"We want you to do something. Lead us to the girl, or you are yourself a prisoner."

"Let me see your warrant."

"None is needed."

"Yes, there is, and I won't surrender until it is showed ter me. That I won't!"

"Had you rather be arrested on a warrant than to give up the girl, and be free from all trouble?"

"She ain't here."

"Woman, I believe you are doing this to gain time!" suddenly declared the Plunger. "No tricks, now, or it will go hard with you."

"Raid the whole place!" cried Silky. "Don't be bluffed by her any more. Go ahead of our own will!"

"Hullo! somebody comes!" warned Shiner.

It was true; but the person who came proved to be only a slight girl. She was dressed in a loose white robe, and her face was of the same color. A victim of opium, one would say at first sight, and they stood still in the presence of what was like an apparition. There was soon something to arouse them—she spoke hurriedly:

"Why do you linger here? You have been delayed until your prey has escaped. Gillen has taken the girl away!"

"When? How? Where?" cried Silky.

"Out of the other door, but a moment ago. He was soon aware of your purpose, and he has seized the chance to evade you for now. Go to the ferry at the foot of the street, if you would save her."

Silky Shaw dashed out of the door.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

THE FIGHT ON THE RIVER.

THE Race-Track Detective stood ready. The statement of the pale-faced girl, as well as her manner, had the appearance of truth, but he was not so hasty as Silky had proved. This might be a trick to lead them astray.

"Young woman," he replied, "Where is proof of all this?"

"My word!" she answered.

"Let it to be trusted?"

Her head fell for a moment, and then was lifted boldly.

"I am a wreck through opium," she admitted, "but I am not lost to all honor. I tell the truth; go and prove it by intercepting them ere they can take to the river."

"Come with me as a proof of your good faith."

"I will. This white dress is not for street wear, but I will do anything. A sister woman is in the power of a villain; I will aid her if I can."

She started toward the exit, but this proof of her sincerity was not required. The door was opened abruptly and Silky again stood in their presence.

"Hustle!" he exclaimed, breathlessly. "They are at the river!"

"Did ye see 'em?" demanded Shiner.

"Yes."

"Sure et's the right gal?"

"Yes, yes; it is Merry!"

Peter had not waited to ask questions. Well did he know Silky was to be relied upon, and he had only paused to say to the young woman who had given them such timely news that he would see her again. Then he was ready, and he rushed out with his comrades beside him.

"It'll be a hard pull," added Silky. "They have a row-boat, and are going over that way. Their aim seems to be Jersey. Hustle!"

"Can we get a boat, if we miss them?" asked Peter.

"I'm afraid we shall have to rely on the ferry-boat."

"Then stop them by all means."

The trio were about out of wind when they arrived at the river, and it did not add to their physical comfort to see that the boat they wanted to head off was already putting out on the stream.

"Too late!" cried Silky.

"Darned ef we ain't done up!" agreed Shiner.

Peter looked anxiously up and down the river. He wanted to find another row-boat, but no such craft was in sight.

"They'll be in Jersey in a little while," almost groaned Silky.

"The ferry-boat!" added the Plunger, quickly. "It is our one hope."

"That's the figger!" assented Silky.

"Run for your life!"

The craft named was in the slip, and they wasted no time in getting aboard. They raced along to the drop, and it was well they did. The boat was ready, and they were the last persons to pass the ticket-window. All this was in their favor, and they moved to the front and experienced a degree of satisfaction as the craft swung out into the river.

When it did so two facts became apparent—there was a moon of dull power half-screened by clouds, and the water was unusually rough.

"Yonder is the boat!" exclaimed Silky, pointing out on the stream.

"Yes, with a gal an' two men in it," added Shiner. "We have them—or, rather, we ain't got them."

"It takes all their power to keep the craft up to its work," remarked Pete, quickly. "The tide is a torrent which troubles them. That is all the better, as it will give us chance to cross ahead of them, I think."

"Let me yell to them," began Shiner, "an' see them—"

"Not for your life!" cried the sport.

"No?"

"No. Let them be ignorant of our pursuit. The moon leaves the ferry-boat in shadow, and we want to remain as obscure as we can. Good! We shall get over first, and we may be able to head them off—if they hang to their course."

Standing there the watchers surveyed all

with eager attention, and the struggle of the abductors was much to their liking. The larger craft gradually passed the smaller, and it looked as if they would enter the slip well ahead of the abductors. Pete and his allies changed ends on their boat in order to watch more closely, and they soon had opportunity to see all they wished. The ferry-boat was delayed near the slip by the presence of another craft of the same line, and the rowers drew nearer.

"I am tempted to leap overboard and have it out with them right here," muttered Pete.

"Take it cool, old man!" urged Silky. "We are sure to get at them. Whew! but they are having all they can do to wrestle with the water. A little mischance, now, and—"

"Look!"

"What?"

"They back water. What is wrong?"

"I see," added Shiner. "It's a floatin' log, an' they are sheerin' off ter get away from it. Ha!"

"A collision!"

It was true. The boat was hit squarely by the log, and the next act was startling to all. The boat went over like a cork, and the three occupants were spilled in the river before more could be said!

"Say, that's death!" declared Shiner. "Who kin swim in sech a rough water as that?"

"Where is Merry?" demanded Peter, nervously.

"Yes, where is she? The men cling to the boat, but where is she? Heavens! is she lost in the whirlpool of waves?"

"Look!" again cried Shiner.

"Ha! she swims!—she lives! She supports herself gallantly!"

Silky Shaw made the exclamation exultantly, but Peter looked to the future, as well as the present.

"She can't do so long," he asserted. "That water would try the best swimmer in the world."

"She's a strong swimmer."

"I know it, Silky; but see what she has to contend with."

"See! she is swimming toward the log."

The prediction seemed well founded, for it was a most serious battle for life. Andy and Feegan were so far away that they cut no figure in the struggle for the time being, and she was left to fight it out with the swift-running waves. Only her own skill and endurance stood between her and death then. Or was there more?

From the ferry-boat the detective anxiously watched the girl's struggle for life.

Merry was nearing the log, but the chances were still against her, and death went by her side.

Suddenly, however, Pete broke the painful spell which was upon him. Grasping Silky's arm he exclaimed:

"I am going to her aid. Go you with this craft, and as soon as you touch the drop get a row-boat and come to our help. My place is now there. Do your part when you can."

The sport threw off his coat and leaped over the gate. One step more and he was at the verge; then he plunged into the stream.

All his life he had been addicted to swimming as a recreation, and there were but few men along the twin rivers who could excel him in skill and strength in this line. He showed his power now. The instant that he recovered his self-control he struck out, and even the current did not prevent him from making good progress. Straight toward the imperiled girl he went, and those who watched were exhilarated as they saw his lusty efforts. Words of encouragement came from Silky and Shiner, but he heard them not. He heard nothing, saw nothing but what pertained to his work.

Looking ahead he perceived that Merry had gained the log, but it was equally clear that she was still in trouble, for it was disposed to roll under her, and her place was maintained only with constant exertion.

But she was no longer to struggle alone—with a few final strokes Peter gained her side.

"Merry!" he exclaimed.

She looked; a glad cry escaped her lips. He clasped her in his arms; he gave his strength and she seemed anchored to the log firmly.

"Thank Heaven!—thank Heaven!" she murmured.

"Be brave, little girl!" he directed. "We will be all right now."

They were safe for the time, as far as the river went, for he was able to support both; but his observant eye soon detected fresh signs of danger. Gillen and Feegan had righted the boat in some unknown way, and were fast bearing down upon them.

"Ha!" shouted Andy, "we have her again!"

"There's a man with her!" added Feegan.

"I see him, but that will soon be over. I'll fix him!"

He stood erect in the boat.

Bang!

A bullet whistled past Peter's ear.

"Oh!" cried Merry, "we shall be killed!"

Bang!

It was the evident intention of Gillen to end the life of the rescuer then and there, and he was indifferent to what he might do to Merry in the mean time. The cold-blooded assault enraged the Plunger, and he acted with zeal himself. He carried a revolver, and was confident that the cartridges were still useful.

He drew the weapon quickly—it would never do to let such villains have their way and commit butchery.

Leveling the revolver and aiming to the best of his ability, he deliberately fired at the leading ruffian, for the cartridge exploded.

Gillen uttered a cry of terror.

Encouraged by this result, the resolute Plunger sent shot after shot toward the mark, and by the time he had emptied the chambers, he had a clear field. Not only had the tide taken the boat away, but Feegan was pulling with all his power, while Gillen crouched in the bottom of the craft, holding his hands to his head as if he had acquired a pain there. Clearly, he did not wish to check the retreat.

The detective looked anxiously at his companion.

"Merry, Merry, are you hurt?" he cried.

"No; but you, *you*? Have you escaped?"

"Yes."

"Thank Heaven!"

There was a world of meaning in the exclamation, but it could not be commented upon then. Even Pete's strength was failing. Nervously he glanced toward the New York shore. Joy!—the boat was coming.

"Saved!" he cried.

CHAPTER XXXV.

A MAD MOVE IS MADE.

THE following morning Luke Harkness was seated in a saloon in the lower part of the city. His manner indicated that he was watching for somebody, and while he waited he indulged in thought. He was not a pleasant object, with his dark, emaciated face, and he might have been used as a model of one meditating crime with both outward propriety and actual truth.

Suddenly his face lighted a little. But Feegan had entered the place, and, after a brief glance, had started toward him.

"Where is Gillen?" Luke demanded.

"Hush!" warily replied Feegan. "Don't whisper de word here!"

"Why not?"

"He's in de water cooler."

"What do you mean?"

"In exile; retired from public view; gone out o' biz at the old stand. Yes, by gosh! an' he's got two holes in his anatomy!"

"What?"

"Andrew is laid up fer repairs. He's got a pair o' bullets in his hide. Been winged by a gun, an' is on his bed with a daisy case o' too much shoot. Yes, sirree, Andy's out o' et fer awhile, I come ter tell ye of it, fer he's afraid when he didn't show up 'cordin' ter the agreement, you would go inquirin' fer him, an' he wanted ter lay low until the holes in his leather got healed up. See?"

"Shot? Who did it?"

"An enemy. So he told me ter say, an' that's all I have ter say. Lukey, old sport, you'll hev ter paddle yer own canoe fer awhile."

"But I'm out of money."

"So is Andy, an' he ain't fit ter git any. He told me ter say so ter you, an' fer you ter do the best ye could until he gits around. See?"

Luke did "see," in part. He tried to learn more, but Bat was duly cautious, and betrayed nothing but what he had been allowed to tell. When he went away, somewhat later, he left Luke in a down-hearted mood.

"Cut off from my means of subsistence!" he muttered. "Now, how am I to get along? Who else will give me money?—and I *can't* work!"

There was no visible reason why he could not do the latter, for he had been a worker in the days of the Arabs, but he did not take kindly to work, and he meant all he said. He meditated on various subjects for awhile, and then looked at the warm September sunshine which was struggling into the room.

"I wonder what is going on at the country home of the Ashbys, and how Demonio is doing?" he thought. "I believe I'll take a run up there after dinner."

He studied his slender finances, and decided to carry out the plan. He had but little left, but it might as well be paid out one way as another. So he decided to go, and waited impatiently for the hour to arrive.

It was two o'clock when he left the New York depot, and the trip was soon made. He left the country station and walked toward the Ashby residence by a roundabout route. Reaching the grounds he as secretly entered, and then proceeded to investigate.

Going near the stable he saw Otis at work, but there was no other sign of life.

"I wonder what Demonio is doing?" he muttered. "Time was that I could go and talk with the hostler, but since the row at Ashby's city place I don't dare to try it. There is no sound from the stable, and I reckon the horse-demon is quiet. Now for the house!"

He had not expected to see any one around the house, but when he reached a place of observation he found that there was life there, and its first evidence impressed him deeply.

"Catholine!"

It was Mrs. Ashby, herself, standing on the piazza, and his lawless blood fired at the sight. He might have forgot prudence, but there was one thing which restrained him. Beth was by her side.

Luke took position in a thicket and, from the covert, watched closely. He was desirous of knowing if Darius was also present, but he saw no sign of him. The two ladies appeared to have the place all to themselves, and it was a fresh grievance when he noticed that they were in high spirits.

They laughed and chatted merrily, and all this was a thorn in his flesh. He ground his teeth in rage.

"They can be happy when I am ruined!" he hissed. "Not one thought for the man she made a beggar! Oh! that I had the controlling of destiny for a time! I would go to her; I would fold her in my arms; I would touch her lips with kisses even though they were the last of earth! Of earth? Why, it would be heaven!"

It was a dangerous idea which had entered his disordered mind, and it was not banished by the force of will which a reasonable man would have exercised.

The hours wore on. Catholine and Beth came and went, but always together. Harkness skulked, wolf-like, in his ambush and waited. For what did he wait? The ways of fate are unreadable. Who could tell what would come as an end to that watch?

It was nearing the hour when, at that season, the night-shadows began to fall when his blood suddenly leaped in his veins.

"At last, at last!" he exclaimed.

Beth had started toward the stable, walking lightly and swinging her hat as she went. Catholine was left alone on the piazza.

"I will see her!" he cried. "I will, though I die for it. I will go—the situation can be no worse. I'll go, and if she is scornful I will have a kiss from her lips. By my life! I will be dog or master!"

Swiftly he went along the walk, but so screened from view that Mrs. Ashby saw nothing until he appeared by her very side. He came suddenly and was greeted with a cry of alarm.

He stood silent.

"You!" murmured Catholine.

"Yes, Catholine, it is I. Am I welcome?"

Impetuous was the beginning, and the wild gleam of his eyes added to her fright. She tried to answer, but no words passed her lips. She was impressed with the idea that the appearance boded ill to her.

"I have come to see you again," he went on, hurriedly. "I have come because I could not stay away—come because my life is where you are. Come, because I breathe by your favor. Oh! Catholine, was it not cruel to rob me of the Lorrester money?"

Even then the lost wealth was foremost in his mind. That stood first and foremost at all times, and reference to it came to his lips as naturally as the breath of life passed the same portals.

Catholine's heart was throbbing rapidly.

"Mr. Harkness," she faltered, "don't let us speak of this."

Fiercer gleamed his eyes.

"Do you deny me even the privilege of speech?" he cried.

"There should be a limit to that."

"If I am the speaker."

"I am a wife, sir," reminded Catholine, with womanly dignity.

"Yes, but I love you still!" he hotly cried.

"Sir, I will not remain with you!"

She turned to enter the house, but the act recalled him to prudence in a measure. He imploringly exclaimed:

"Forgive me!—forgive me! I did not know what I said. Can't you bear a little with a man who has had so much to contend with? Do you forget what my life has been? Think of the long days under the burning sun of the desert, and the agony of every hour—of the whips of the Arabs which left many a wound on my flesh—of the pangs of hunger and thirst—of the living death of captivity! Am I to have no pity?"

"I give you abundant pity," replied Catholine, sadly. "Most sincerely I feel for you, but there can be no more. My pity is graded according to your deserts. If you would have it all you must forget the wild dreams which are in your mind. I am Darius Ashby's wife, and I owe him all that honor and affection can give. To no other human being can I listen to the words you persist in pouring upon me."

Nothing could be kinder than her manner but it was full of decisive firmness, too, and he knew his fate. His head dropped low and he twisted his hands nervously.

"Doomed! doomed!" he muttered.

"Have I been harsh?"

"No, but you kill me with your want of love for me."

"What can you expect?"

His head was lifted, and his eyes glittered with fresh wildness.

"What did I seek?" he cried.

"You know that is useless, and I beg that you will not speak of it."

"In other words. I can go off and stay away from you, and you will give me the same good will you bestow on a servant—if, indeed, you give me any—but I cannot speak a word to you of my love—"

"You are right, sir; you cannot and shall not!" exclaimed Catholine, losing patience.

He pounced upon the offensive word.

"Shall not?" he almost shouted. "Shall not? And old Guerdon Lorrester willed us to each other as he had a right—willed us to each other with his money—willed *you* to *me*! Now I cannot even speak to you except as a servant can. I am a dog in your sight, and nothing more. Stop! you shall not go!—you shall hear me! You set the limit, and it bars me from everything. I am to be ice when near you—ice, when my heart is a seething volcano. Ice? No, by my life! I will not endure such a fate. I love you, and I will give you the proof!"

He had checked her flight by the violent grasp of his hand, and he now folded her to his breast and pressed kisses on her lips.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

LUKE'S TRAGEDY COMES.

CATHOLINE uttered a cry of terror; a cry for help. Alone, she was impotent to save herself, for his grasp was strong and it defied her most strenuous effort when she tried to break away. The situation was appalling to her then, for she felt that even her life was in danger.

"Help! help!"

The cry floated out on the air.

"There is no help!" hissed Luke Harkness. "I have you!—you are alone with me! You are mine, *mine!*"

"Help! help!"

Footsteps on the graveled walk; quick, hurrying footsteps. Nearer they came, but Harkness did not hear them.

"My life! my love!" he raved; "you are mine, all mine!"

A blow! Luke Harkness lay on the floor, and above him stood Darius Ashby. One more cry from Catholine, and she fell into her husband's arms. Another footstep, and Beth's voice sounded:

"Darius, look to *him!* I will care for Catholine."

The fallen man was struggling up, and Darius willingly resigned his wife to his sister's care. Then he was ready when Luke gained his feet. He came up mad with rage, and at the same moment he pulled out a revolver.

"You!" he panted; "you! I will kill you!—I will—"

Click!

The hammer of the revolver flew up, and another moment would have seen the end of Darius Ashby's life. It was a fateful crisis, but he was equal to it. With a rapid motion he wrested the weapon away and flung it to one side; then he grasped Luke by the neck and forced him to his knees as if he had been a mere child.

"Vile coward!" uttered the master of the situation, "you have reached the limit of endurance. You have tried your infamous work once too often, and I have found that the clemency I have shown you has been thrown away. This night you sleep in a prison cell, and the law shall have its course."

"Let me up!" grated Harkness.

"I will when bonds have been put on you. Where is Otis? He shall tie you like the dog you are."

"Give me a chance!" shouted Luke. "Give me a chance and I will kill you!"

"Your chance will be to work out your sentence in Sing Sing."

"You will not, you dare not—"

"Ho! Otis; this way!" called Ashby.

"Let me go, I say; let me go!"

"This way, Otis!"

Harkness was struggling madly, but all in vain; the strength of his foeman was only equaled by the latter's icy calmness. Luke was wild with more than rage. He had been long a slave—must he now be a convict? The thought was a thought of terror, and he made a last frantic effort.

He caught at Darius's legs, and nearly toppled him over. It was the chance for which he longed. His enemy was off his guard somewhat, and the ex-slave bent every energy to the final attempt.

It was successful. He broke Darius's hold, and was again a free man. Perhaps it was well for Ashby that the ex-slave did not have the revolver, then. It was not in his possession, and without it there was no desire to fight on his part. Instead, flight was his ruling passion.

He turned and fled down the steps.

In the meanwhile Otis was responding to his master's call. He was near at hand, and Darius, seeing him, shouted to him to stop the fugitive. The hostler's will was good, and he made a forward rush.

By an agile dodge Harkness avoided him and ran rapidly down the walk. He looked around and saw both Otis and Darius in pursuit.

"They will chase me; they will hunt me like a rabid dog!" he grated. "Shall I be sent to Sing Sing? Never, never! I'll die first!"

He was an older man than either of them, and he doubted his ability to outrun them. It was this which made the case look so hopeless to him.

Madly he raced on, but only a few steps had been gone when he saw that which revived his hopes. By the walk stood a horse champing its bits, and seeming to feel in the best of spirits. It flashed upon Luke that when Darius put in an appearance so unexpectedly he had just returned from a saddle ride, and that he had abruptly deserted his horse at the cry for help and left the animal where it was.

Hope flashed to the front. Here was the

means of escape, and he could not be baffled if he could get the horse under way soon enough.

He ran on; he reached the animal; he leaped into the saddle with one wild bound.

"Away, away!" he shouted. "Run as you never run before. My life depends on you!"

With a fierce pull at the rein he had forced the horse's head around toward the road, and now tried the experiment of starting him quickly. It was a rough experiment. He clinched his hand and, with cruel force, struck the animal again and again in the ribs, each blow making a resounding thud.

After all that there was no reason why he should think his stolen mount too sluggish.

A wild scream broke from the horse, and he threw himself so suddenly, fiercely and erratically into the air that Harkness was cast off like a rubber ball. He fell to the earth helpless, but, filled with the instinct of self-preservation—with the desire to escape the two men—he scrambled partially to his feet.

It was a terrible sight which he saw.

The horse was bearing down upon him with open mouth and flaming eyes, filled with a fury before which even Luke's lost the right to be called forceful, and madness was written in every way in the manner of the animal which had been roused from docility to venom by the runaway's merciless blows.

Harkness looked, and his courage gave way.

"Powers of mercy! *it is Demonio!*" he gasped.

He could say no more. The maddened horse was upon him, and he was beaten down by the iron-shod hoofs. He fell helpless the wild scream of the demon steed ringing in his ears—fell, and was struck again and again with force which crushed consciousness out of him.

The work of devastation so subtly planned had found its end, and after a good record as Red Royal, the expected break had come and the terrible Demonio had found another victim!

Otis and Darius were rushing to the spot, and the latter was sounding loud calls to the horse to leave its prey. Well might it be done now, for Harkness lay still. Yet, in days past Demonio had never been reluctant to turn on those who came to the aid of his victims.

How would it be now?

In the days last gone Demonio had learned to know Darius as even his superior and master, and the voice appealed to him even in his rage. His impulse was not to fight, but to run. He turned; he fled wildly, blindly; he gained speed, and then—with a heavy sound he collided, head-on, with a tree and fell in a heap. He struggled for a moment, and then lay as still as his prey.

Demonio had broken his neck in the collision, and he would never score another red record!

"A Mr. Brand is in the parlor, and says he wishes to see you on important business."

It was two hours later when this message was brought to Beth Ashby. The time was past when she scorned the call of the detective, and she went at once. With a kind of new dignity Peter rose to greet her.

"Miss Ashby," he began, abruptly, "I bring you strange, glad news."

Beth sighed. There had been events in the house during the evening which made her feel ill prepared to hear anything, but there was that in his manner which called for her attention.

"I shall be glad to listen to you."

"Are we alone? Is there no danger of listeners?"

"None whatever."

"Then let me speak one moment of the past. Years ago you and I met at a summer resort. You were younger then than you are now, and not so wise. I fell in love with you, and you thought you were in love with me. We took a rash step. We met the last day you were there and were married. An hour later you were on your way to New York.

"Once alone you grew wiser, and when I, too, returned, you were sorry for what you

had done. You questioned me as to my life: you learned I was a player of the races for my living; you learned of my method of life, and you refused to admit the marriage, or live with me. You were very bitter against me for urging so speedy a ceremony, and from that day I was forbidden to see you. I never did until of late.

"I admit, now, that I did wrong to speak of marriage on short acquaintance to one so young. I can offer no excuse but my love for you, but I can offer reparation.

"Miss Ashby, I have absolute proof that the ceremony between us was not a lawful one, and that you are to-day as free as ever. I have had agents look it up, and it is true. You are free."

"*Free!*" she echoed, incredulously.

"As free as before you ever met me. For your sake I am glad of this," added the Plunger, slowly, "and I reckon it is best. As you have said, we were never intended for each other. I accept it as gracefully as I can. Here are the documentary proofs. Look at them—"

"Your goodness is overwhelming," cried Beth, tearfully, "and I will look, though I fear I am too much upset to realize all now. A man is dying in this house—a certain Luke Harkness—"

"What! he here, and dying? Quick!—I must see him!"

CHAPTER XXXVII.

THE DETECTIVE FINDS LIGHT.

PLUNGER PETE spoke with force which turned Beth's attention all to the subject last mentioned, and she wonderingly replied:

"Why should you wish to see him?"

"To force a confession from him!" declared the sport. "Detective Swanden is working all at sea to find Hiram Inkrod's murderer, but I have a theory of my own. I believe it was Luke Harkness who did the deed. Some act of violence he did commit that night, for he arrived in New York stained with blood which was not his own. My theory may be wild, but I wanted it tested. Can he be made to confess?"

"I don't know; he is very low, and the local doctor is with him."

"Bid the doctor give him something powerful enough to put life in him for a time. My theory must be tried. Call somebody who can aid in this; it must be tried!"

Deeply excited was the Plunger, and his mood was so catching that Beth did hasten to summon Darius.

Discoveries followed. In his disordered state of mind Harkness had betrayed enough to let them know he had planned to have Darius killed by the horse which had taken his own life, at last, and when Peter heard of it he was not slow to remember how Harkness and Gillen had come to him to know of a horse of fierce temper. Thus, the history of dead Demonio came to light, and the extent of one of Luke's plots was made clear.

The next thing was to get something definite as to the slaying of Inkrod, and it was arranged that Peter should go to the dying man and try to move him. None of them felt much hope, though Harkness was in a condition of collapse both as to body and mind. Something might come of that, possibly. Was it only chance that Luke had talked to Swanden, when his mind was disordered, of a man who knew a secret concerning his case? It was that which had first made Peter suspicious. He was still suspicious.

Merry was alone in her room. Just then Silky Shaw was not in the house. He had been busy all the day with Peter Brand and Shiner Duff, and they had succeeded in finding Andy Gillen in the refuge to which he had gone after his escape from the waters of the North River. Both he and Bat Feegan were in the Tombs and likely to stay there. Much to the grief of Shiner Duff he, too, was there, for his treachery to his old allies brought him before the notice of the police, and it was found that he was wanted for another crime.

The detective had unmasked Shiner as one of the robbers of Ashby's house.

Very thoughtful was Merry, this evening, but the passage of time finally led her to rise with the intention of retiring. As

she did so she heard a knock at the door. She opened it.

The Plunger was there!

"Am I too late?" he asked. "I have something important to say."

"Come in, then, of course. Has anything gone wrong with you?"

"Why do you think it?"

"You look strangely serious," and her own manner was anxious as she studied his face.

"Nothing wrong, Merry, but I have seen serious sights this night. I have heard a man confess to murder; I have seen him die after confessing."

Merry changed color.

"Who was it?"

"You have heard of the murder at Darius Ashby's—but I know you have. Well, I have been acting detective, and, through my efforts, the mystery has been solved. This night, just before he died, I prevailed upon Luke Harkness to confess the crime. Harkness had just left the Ashby house, mad with rage at Darius, but was still hanging around when he met Inkrod, as the latter entered the grounds. Mistaking him in the dark for Darius, Harkness shot him. That is the story in brief—my only detective case," added the Plunger, smiling. "It is done, for Harkness is dead."

Some further particulars he gave, and Merry listened with close attention. She did not seem wholly satisfied, and finally remarked, with just a grain of resentment:

"You seem to be on very good terms with the Ashbys."

"Now that this matter is settled, I shall see them no more," replied Peter, with decision.

Merry looked at him curiously, but made no comment.

"I fall into my old life," he added.

"Your old life? That of the race-track?"

"Why not, Merry?"

"Do you remember the talk we have had about it?"

"Yes."

"Are you still determined to get your living by betting on the races?—by associating with the men you meet there?"

Peter moved uneasily.

"Don't you think you are prejudiced against the business, Merry?" he asked, slowly.

"You have admitted all the evil I have claimed for the calling."

"I suppose you mean the associations. You said, too, that gambling was wrong. Well, playing cards for money is not just right, perhaps, but racing is different. Merry, you don't know how it stirs one's blood to see a noble horse fly around the track—you don't, surely. Why, it is the greatest sight of one's life!"

"I have not spoken against seeing races, but to make it a business to bet on them! Does that elevate a man? Does it bring him good associations? Does it place him in good society? or make him a man of honor?"

Again Peter moved uneasily.

"But it thrills one's blood so to see the races. Why, the horses go like the wind—"

Merry put her hand upon the Plunger's.

"Peter," she spoke, in a low tone, "I have abandoned the stage forever, because I did not think it a good calling for any honorable girl. Will it be any more for you to give up the races as a business? Will you not do it to please the girl you helped when she was friendless?"

Something in her manner made Peter's gaze go quickly to her face. There he saw something which electrified him.

"You know the money I have been making," she added. "Don't you think that when I decide to give it up, principle and regard for honor are at the bottom of it?"

"I know it; I'm dead sure of it, Merry. But me—why do you care about my case?"

"What should I have been but for you? From what misery and want did you help me? Did you ever fail in kindness to me? Never, never! And why shouldn't I wish to do you good in return?"

Peter's mind had been very busy. That something in Merry's face appealed to him strongly, and it touched a responsive chord in his own being. Her words had quickened his ideas. Who had ever shown such interest in him but Merry? Was not such a

friend worth having? He knew her many good qualities. A rare girl was she, and it quickened his pulse as he thought that she—she cared for his welfare!

Ideas were in his mind which seemed wild to him, but, prudence to the contrary notwithstanding, they found vent.

"But if I make a change, what am I to do?" he asked.

"You say you have just finished one detective case. Why not continue in the same way? Why not make that your business?"

The suggestion fell like a shot. He had never thought of it before.

"Do this," continued Merry, "and honor and fame will be yours."

The detective turned on her and caught her hands.

"If I do it, what will be my reward?" he demanded.

"I will help you if I can—"

"You can; you can, Merry, but only in one way. You can help me as my wife! Merry, if there is a girl in the world who is a perfect one you are she. Merry, I have seen that the gold in your nature is pure gold. I see in you my own unselfish friend. Merry, I love you, and, if you would have me change my life, it is for you to show me the way. Will you come to me as my wife?"

A few minutes later there was silence in the room, but the pause was not an awkward one. If their tongues were still their minds were busy, and to Peter and Merry had come a peace which was past understanding to any one else. Heart to heart, they were happy, and the shadows trembled in the room, and the sound of footsteps came restlessly from the street, but in their hearts there was neither shadow nor what was restless. There was only peace.

The story is told. Luke Harkness sleeps in his grave, his memory dark with many crimes, among which is that of the garroting act, for Pete, once suspicious, managed to extract confession of that, too. An unhonored name is Luke's—the reward of evil doing.

Gillen, Feegan and Duff are in Sing Sing. Detective Swanden could not add a triumph to his list, but he scoffs at his successful rival, and seems annoyed that Inkrod's death is so fully explained.

Short as his career has been, Peter Brand is rated as an expert detective already. He has no time, he says, for the races. Keenly devoted to his business calling, he finds the one happiness of his hours of leisure in the society of Merry, his good genius and his wife.

Silky Shaw declares he will never have another partner equal to the one he lost on Merry's retirement, but he is doing well as it is.

Guerdon Lorrester's money went to charity, but Catholine and Darius have no need of it. Darius still rides, but he is careful not to get another equine Demonio.

Beth has proved her rekindled good will to Peter by many kind acts to his wife, and she freely admits that if his character was once lacking in nobility he has amply redeemed himself.

All worthy persons now do honor to Peter Brand, once the "Plunger" of the race-courses.

THE END.

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